

Woman who survived 1918 flu, world war succumbs to COVID

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Dorene Giacopini talks about her mother Primetta Giacopini, who died of COVID-19, from her home in Richmond, Calif. on Monday, Sept 27, 2021. Primetta Giacopini's life ended the way it began—in a pandemic. She was two years old when she lost her mother to the Spanish flu in Connecticut in 1918. Giacopini contracted COVID-19 earlier this month. The 105-year-old struggled with the disease for a week before she died Sept. 16. Credit: AP Photo/Josh Edelson

She lived a life of adventure that spanned two continents. She fell in love with a World War II fighter pilot, barely escaped Europe ahead of Benito Mussolini's fascists, ground steel for the U.S. war effort and advocated for her disabled daughter in a far less enlightened time. She was, her daughter said, someone who didn't make a habit of giving up.

And then this month, at age 105, Primetta Giacopini's life ended the way it began—in a pandemic.

"I think my mother would have been around quite a bit longer" if she hadn't contracted COVID," her 61-year-old daughter, Dorene Giacopini, said. "She was a fighter. She had a hard life and her attitude always was ... basically, all Americans who were not around for World War II were basically spoiled brats."

Primetta Giacopini's mother, Pasquina Fei, died in Connecticut of the flu in 1918 at age 25. That flu pandemic killed about 675,000 Americans—a death toll eclipsed this month by the 2020-21 coronavirus pandemic.

Primetta was 2 years old when her mother died. Her father, a laborer, didn't want to raise Primetta or her younger sister, Alice. He sent Alice back to Italy, their ancestral homeland, and handed Primetta to an Italian foster family that then relocated to Italy in 1929.

"The way Mom talked about it, he didn't want to raise those kids alone, and men didn't do that at that time," Dorene recalled. "It's ridiculous to me."



Dorene Giacopini holds a photo of her with her mother, Primetta Giacopini, from her home in Richmond, Calif. on Monday, Sept 27, 2021. Primetta Giacopini's life ended the way it began—in a pandemic. She was two years old when she lost her mother to the Spanish flu in Connecticut in 1918. Giacopini contracted COVID-19 earlier this month. The 105-year-old struggled with the disease for a week before she died Sept. 16. Credit: AP Photo/Josh Edelson

Primetta supported herself by working as a seamstress. Raven-haired with dark eyes and sharp features, she eventually fell in love with an Italian fighter pilot named Vittorio Andriani.

"I didn't see too much of him because he was always fighting someplace," Primetta told the Golden Gate Wing, a military aviation

club in Oakland, California, in 2008.

Italy entered World War II in June 1940. The local police warned Primetta to leave because Mussolini wanted American citizens out of the country. Primetta refused. Several weeks later, the state police told her to get out, warning her that she could end up in a concentration camp.

In June 1941, Andriani was missing in action; Primetta learned later that he had crashed and died near Malta. While he was missing, she joined a group of strangers making their way out of Italy on a train to Portugal.



Dorene Giacopini holds up a photo of her mother Primetta Giacopini while posing for a photo at her home in Richmond, Calif. on Monday, Sept 27, 2021. Primetta Giacopini's life ended the way it began—in a pandemic. She was two

years old when she lost her mother to the Spanish flu in Connecticut in 1918. Giacopini contracted COVID-19 earlier this month. The 105-year-old struggled with the disease for a week before she died Sept. 16. Credit: AP Photo/Josh Edelson

"In Spain, one can still see, after 2-3 years, the traces of the atrocities of the past," Primetta wrote in a letter to a friend in the midst of her flight. "At Port Bou, the Spanish border, not one house is left standing; everything got destroyed because the town is an important train transit point that brought supplies to the "Reds", the enemy . . . I've seen so much destruction that I've had enough. The day after tomorrow, I get on the ship, and I'm sure all will go well."

In Lisbon she boarded a steamer bound for the United States. She returned to Torrington, bought a Chevrolet sedan for \$500 and landed a job at a General Motors plant in Bristol grinding steel to cover ball bearings for the war effort. She met her husband, Umberto "Bert" Giacopini, on the job. They stayed married until he died in 2002.

Primetta gave birth to Dorene in 1960 and received devastating news: The infant had been born with spina bifida, a birth defect in which the spinal cord doesn't fully develop. For the first 50 years of her life, Dorene needed crutches to walk. Worried that Dorene would slip during Connecticut's winters, the family moved to San Jose in 1975.

"My folks were born a long time ago," she said. "Their attitude about disability, and my mother's attitude about disability, was it was lucky I was smart and I should get a good job I really liked because I probably wouldn't be getting married or have children. They did not take parenting classes."



Dorene Giacopini holds up a photo of her mother Primetta Giacopini while posing for a photo at her home in Richmond, Calif. on Monday, Sept. 27, 2021. Primetta Giacopini's life ended the way it began—in a pandemic. She was two years old when she lost her mother to the Spanish flu in Connecticut in 1918. Giacopini contracted COVID-19 earlier this month. The 105-year-old struggled with the disease for a week before she died Sept. 16. Credit: AP Photo/Josh Edelson

But Primatta was "pushy," Dorene said, and never stopped fighting for her.

She once convinced school officials to move accelerated classes from the third floor of Dorene's school to the first floor so Dorene could

participate. During the springs in Connecticut, she demanded that city sweepers clear their street of salt and sand so Dorene wouldn't slip.

This year, during a visit on Sept. 9, Dorene noticed her mother was coughing. She knew her mother's caretaker had been feeling sick after her husband returned from a wedding in Idaho. All three had been vaccinated. But as she drove away, Dorene guessed that her mother had contracted COVID-19.

"I made sure we said 'I love you.'" She did the 'See you later, alligator.' I think we both said 'After a while, crocodile,'" Dorene said. "That was the last time I saw her."



Dorene Giacomini displays a photo of her mother, left, and her, right, dressed as Rosie the Riveter from her home in Richmond, Calif. on Monday, Sept 27,

2021. Primetta Giacopini's life ended the way it began—in a pandemic. She was two years old when she lost her mother to the Spanish flu in Connecticut in 1918. Giacopini contracted COVID-19 earlier this month. The 105-year-old struggled with the disease for a week before she died Sept. 16. Credit: AP Photo/Josh Edelson



A note from President Joe Biden is seen placed among photos of Primetta Giacopini, who died of COVID-19 11 days prior in Richmond, Calif. on Monday, Sept 27, 2021. Primetta Giacopini's life ended the way it began—in a pandemic. She was two years old when she lost her mother to the Spanish flu in Connecticut in 1918. Giacopini contracted COVID-19 earlier this month. The 105-year-old struggled with the disease for a week before she died Sept. 16. Credit: AP Photo/Josh Edelson



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Two days later, Primetta was in the emergency room. Her oxygen levels dropped steadily over the next six days until nurses had to put an oxygen mask on her.

She became confused and fought them so hard she had to be sedated,

Dorene said. Chest X-rays told the story: pneumonia. Faced with a decision of whether to put Primetta on a ventilator—"They said nobody over 80 makes it off a ventilator," Dorene said—she decided to remove her mother's oxygen.

Primetta died two days later, on Sept. 16. She was 105 years old.

"She had such a strong heart that she remained alive for more than 24 hours after they removed the oxygen," Dorene said. "I'm full of maybes, what I should have done with the ventilator . . . (but) it broke through three vaccinated people."

She added: "I'm reminding myself that she was 105. We always talk about ... my grandmother and mother, the only thing that could kill them was a worldwide pandemic."

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