



FIG. 22. *Noor Inayat Khan 813*. Leather, archival pigment on canvas, fabric, metal, zippers; 56½ x 58½ x 2 inches; 2015.

Noor Inayat Khan (1914–1944)

A Special Operations Executive (SOE) agent, Khan became the first female radio operator to be sent from Britain to aid the French resistance. Born: Russia. During Holocaust: Britain, France, Germany (from 1943 October to 1944 September, Noor was in a prison in Pforzheim and then Dachau).

NOOR INAYAT KHAN

Indian Princess and Secret Agent

Shrabani Basu

On September 13, 1944, a beautiful Indian princess lay on the floor of a concentration camp in Dachau. She had been brutally tortured and shot through the head by an SS guard. Her name was Noor Inayat Khan. The Germans knew her only as Nora Baker, a British spy.

In fact, she was the first woman radio operator to be infiltrated into occupied France. She would posthumously be awarded Britain's highest civilian honor, the George Cross, and France would bestow on her the Croix de Guerre. But on that bleak September day, she lay alone.

The story of Noor Inayat Khan, descendant of the celebrated 18th century Indian ruler Tipu Sultan, is one of the most intriguing and tragic stories of World War II. She was born in Moscow on January 1, 1914, in a monastery just outside the Kremlin. Her father was a Sufi preacher, Hazrat Inayat Khan, and her mother was an American, Ora Ray Baker. Her parents met in the United States when her father traveled from his homeland of Baroda in India to the West on the instructions of his teacher to take his message of music and peace to the world. In California, he met Ora Ray Baker, and soon the two had fallen in love.

The couple were married in London and Ora Ray took the Sufi name Begum Amina Sharada. In 1913, Hazrat Inayat Khan was invited to sing in a salon in Moscow, and it was here in the Vusoko Petrovsky Monastery that Noor was born. Her full name was Noor-un-Nisa Inayat Khan - "Light of Womanhood."

Moscow in 1914 was seething with political discontent. As World War I engulfed Europe, the family left for England, where they lived for the next six years. Three more children were born to Inayat and Ora. When Noor was six, the family moved to France and lived in a large house on the outskirts of Paris. Inayat Khan called their home Fazal Manzil - "House of Blessing" - and it was here that Noor was to spend most of her life. Fazal Manzil was everything the name stood for. It was an open house full of music and meditation with Sufis visiting round the year. Noor and her three siblings played in the garden and loved sitting on the high steps outside the house looking out over the lights of Paris.

Tragedy struck the family in 1927 when Inayat Khan died during a visit to India. Her husband's death took a toll on the frail Amina Begum. She went into seclusion, shutting herself off from the world. Noor, at the tender age of 13, took responsibility for the family, becoming a mother to

her siblings. She began to write poems and short stories, a source of solace when the burden of domestic chores became too much to bear.

When she came of age, Noor studied child psychology at the Sorbonne and joined the École Normale to study music, where she eventually fell in love with Azeem Goldenberg, a Jewish musician from Turkey. The two became informally engaged. At the same time, Noor began finding her feet as a successful writer of children's stories and was published in the Sunday literary section of *Le Figaro*. In 1939, her first book, *Twenty Jataka Tales*, was published in England.

However, war clouds were gathering in Europe and all dreams for her writing were quashed as England and France declared war against Germany. Noor immediately volunteered for the Red Cross and began training. In 1940, with the German army on the outskirts of Paris, Noor and her brother Vilayat made a decision that was to change their lives. Sitting in their father's Oriental Room, looking out over the lights of Paris, they made the decision to go to London and join the war effort.

Though they were Sufis and believed in non-violence, Noor felt that she could not stand by and watch Hitler's pogrom on the Jews. She had been brought up by her father to believe in the universality of all religions. There was another conflict in her: she believed firmly in Indian Independence and was a great admirer of Gandhi and Nehru, who had all been jailed by the British at the outbreak of the war. However, she felt that the fight against Fascism was the greater need of the hour. For the moment she would put aside her difference of opinion with Churchill. There was a bigger cause to fight for and she was prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice for it.

In a bombed out London, Vilayat volunteered for the RAF, and Noor - following her brother - volunteered for the Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF). Here she was trained as a radio operator, becoming the first batch of women to train in this field.

Soon Noor was tapping away at her Morse code, when the Special Operation Executive (SOE), seeking to recruit people with language skills, noticed her. The SOE was a crack organization set up by Churchill to aid the



Resistance movements in occupied countries. Their job was sabotage and providing arms and money to the Resistance. Noor, who was fluent in French, was called for an interview at the offices of the SOE. She was told that if she volunteered, she would be sent as an agent to occupied France after training. She would have no protection, as she would not be in uniform, and would be shot if caught. Noor had been trained as a wireless operator in the WAAF. As a trained secret agent, she would have to learn to survive, operating with a false identity and transmitting messages clandestinely to support the Resistance. Without a moment's hesitation, she accepted.

One morning, her colleagues in the WAAF found that she had simply disappeared. There was no note, no forwarding address, just a folded blanket on her bed. Noor had left for her career in the secret service. In a selection of country houses spread around England, Noor's training began. She was taught to handle guns and explosives, to break locks, to kill silently in the dark, to find sources, to use dead letter boxes, to practice sending letters in code and to improve her Morse code. She was given the code name Madeleine. Noor Inayat Khan, a gentle writer and musician, became Madeleine, the British agent.

On a full moon night in June 1943, Noor flew

to France to start her dangerous mission. She was armed only with a false passport, some French francs, her pistol and a set of four pills, including a lethal cyanide pill. She was on her way back to Paris, knowing that the Nazis had occupied her home and that Azeem had been rounded up and imprisoned with other Jews outside Paris. The Lysander aircraft dropped her in a field in France. She was now on her own and would have to make her way to Paris to join her circuit. Her immediate chief was Henri Garry, a local French recruit.

Noor quickly settled in, beginning transmission within 72 hours of arrival. But within a week, disaster struck her circuit. The Gestapo captured all of the top operatives and their wireless sets were seized. Noor was advised to go into hiding immediately. Eventually London contacted her and asked her to return as it was too dangerous to stay, but Noor refused. Realizing that she was the last radio link left between London and Paris, she requested to remain and supply information. Single-handedly, she started doing the work of six radio operators. Sticking to the rules of her training, she frequently changed her place of transmission, kept her transmissions short, and even changed her appearance by constantly dyeing her hair. The Germans were hot on her heels. They knew about her, and could even hear her transmissions, but they could not catch her.

Around the middle of October, she was still safe and would have managed to catch a flight out of France if she had not been betrayed. Noor's address was sold to the Nazis for 100,000 francs. The person who betrayed her was Renee Garry, sister of Noor's circuit leader, Henri Garry. Noor was arrested and taken to Gestapo headquarters at 84 Avenue Foch. Almost immediately she made an escape attempt but was caught. A few weeks later, she made another daring escape attempt with two other prisoners, loosening a skylight window and clambering onto the roof. But once again she was discovered. Noor was then labeled a "highly dangerous" prisoner and sent to Pforzheim, a prison on the edge of the Black Forest. Classified as "Nacht und Nebel" (return not required), Noor was shackled in chains and foot irons. She was regularly beaten, tortured and interrogated but

she revealed nothing about her circuit and gave out no names. Despite the desolation, she kept her spirits up, often thinking about her father and how he would soothe her when she was feeling low. By scratching a message on her food bowl, she managed to establish contact with the women prisoners in other cells. Soon the messages went back and forth. "Vive la France," wrote Noor. The girls wrote back to her with encouraging words. At night they could hear her crying in her cell and often heard her being slapped and interrogated.

On the night of September 11, 1944, Noor was ordered to come out of her cell. "I am leaving" were the final words she managed to scratch on her bowl. She was driven to the railway station with three other women agents and put on the train to Munich. They were told they were going to work as agricultural laborers. None of them realized that their escorting officer, Max Wassmer, was actually carrying their execution orders. They reached Dachau at midnight and walked with their suitcases to the concentration camp. In the chill air they saw the searchlights combing the compound and huts where the prisoners were packed like cattle. It was to be a long night for Noor. Perhaps because she was labeled "highly dangerous" and perhaps because she was dark-skinned, she was singled out for further torture. All night long, she was kicked and beaten.

Her last words were "Liberté." After she was ordered to kneel, she was then shot point blank in the back of the head by SS guard, Wilhelm Ruppert. Her frail body slumped on the floor, and immediately afterwards, thrown into the blazing crematorium. Eyewitnesses saw smoke billowing out the chimneys. Back in England, both her mother and brother had the same dream. Noor came to them surrounded by blue light. She told them she was free.

Noor was posthumously awarded the Croix de Guerre and the George Cross. In November 2012, Princess Anne unveiled a memorial bust of Noor Inayat Khan in the leafy surroundings of Gordon Square, near the house in London where she lived as a secret agent, and from where she left on her fatal mission. In 2014, Britain's Royal Mail released a stamp of Noor Inayat Khan, marking the centenary of her birth. ■