

## Noor Inayat Khan



### London Memorial Project

### Noor's Life Until About 26

Noor-un-nisa (Noor) Inayat Khan was born on New Year's Day 1914 in Moscow, where her father, Hazrat Inayat Khan, was teaching and his musical troupe was playing. Originally she was named Russa, then Noor.

The family moved to Paris and then, on the outbreak of WWI, to London, where Hazrat Inayat Khan founded the Sufi Order in 1915. Noor's brother Vilayat was born there June 19, 1916. Around 1919–1920, the family moved to Gordon Square, where the memorial statue of Noor will be located.

In autumn 1920 the family moved to France as a result of British suspicion of the Khan family and its possible connection to the Indian independence movement. They settled at Fazal Manzil in Paris. Noor became a shy, earnest, and friendly young woman. She developed her poetry, her music, and her love life — her most important boyfriend was Jewish — and obtained a degree in child psychology in 1938 from the University of Paris. She became a writer of children's books in particular and contributed literary articles to newspapers; she also broadcasted on the French Children's Hour.

Pir-o-Murshid Hazrat Inayat Khan died in 1927, and Noor, then 13, greatly helped her mother raise her three younger siblings (Vilayat, Hidayat, and Claire).

WWII broke out in September 1939; in June 1940 Noor, her mother, and two of her siblings were forced to flee from Paris to England again, which they did with considerable difficulty on the last boat from Bordeaux. Noor was now 26. They lived close to Gordon Square, near the University of London in north central London. By that time, after losing the Battle of Britain and being unable to invade the UK, the Nazis were bombing and fire bombing Britain.

### Noor's Service in WWII 1940–44

Noor developed the idea of helping the war effort once she understood what the Nazis were up to, though she was also a passionate supporter of Indian independence. She quickly joined the Women's Auxiliary Air Force in November 1940 as Nora Inayat Khan, and was trained as a wireless operator.

The Special Operations Executive (SOE), created by Winston Churchill to sabotage the Germans behind their front lines and to support the French Resistance, became interested in her because she was fully bilingual in French and English. In April 1942, the British cabinet passed a resolution to allow women to become field agents. In November 1942, Noor was recruited after only one interview — most potential agents required several interviews — because she was so impressive. She joined SOE in February 1943.

At spy school, she went through the classic training that showed her strengths (for example, her passion and her fluency in French culture and language) as well as her weaknesses (for example, a certain dreaminess and showing emotions under the duress of practice enemy cross-examination). She was given the code name "Madeleine." She had to come up with a convincing cover story, demonstrate consistent French mannerisms, find a flat from which she could safely transmit, learn how to set up live- and dead-letter boxes, become able to tell if she was being followed, and know how to handle questioning that could include extreme techniques should she be captured. She was approved in something of a rush because of the lack of suitable field agents and never finished her training.

On the night of June 16–17, 1943, Noor, alias Jeanne-Marie Renier, a children's nurse, was taken with others by Lysander aircraft and landed at a secret airstrip in the Loir (not Loire) Valley behind enemy lines, the very first woman radio operator to be flown into occupied France. She joined the "Prosper" circuit. Unfortunately, the

Germans had already infiltrated the SOE network, so it was only a matter of time until she would be discovered and arrested. Madeleine herself, however, was also careless. For example, she left her codebook lying around in one of her first meetings.

She made her contacts and set up as radio operator in Paris. The Prosper circuit started to unravel by June 21, 1943 with the arrest of some agents, somewhat due to agent and British carelessness. Those who cracked under Gestapo interrogation gave information that led to the arrest of hundreds. By late July 1943, with the arrests of six radio operators, the only radio operator left in Paris with a transmitter was Madeleine. She worked for several circuits for that reason, exposing herself further. During the next few weeks, she became more confident and effective, passing through several narrow escapes.

Although ordered to return to Britain, she refused to do so as she was the only radio operator left. On October 13, 1943, Madeleine was finally caught after having been betrayed by a jealous woman. She fought fiercely but was subdued. The codebooks she carried with her and her files of prior messages were also seized. This seizure enabled the Gestapo to continue transmitting as Madeleine. As a result, the British SOE did not realize she had been captured for several months. She was taken to the Gestapo HQ at 84 Avenue Foch in Paris. Despite questioning by skilled interrogators, she did not crack. No arrests were ever made by the Gestapo as a result of weeks of questioning Noor. She chose to remain silent.

She made two escape attempts, one extremely daring on November 25–26, 1943. As a result of the latter, she was immediately transferred to Pforzheim prison in Germany. During the transfer she made another attempt to escape. At Pforzheim, she was held in a cell for months. She was classified as an extremely dangerous prisoner, so she was chained hand and foot and kept on the lowest rations. In the end she was forced to wear only sackcloth.

On September 11, 1944, she was transferred together with three other SOE women prisoners to Dachau concentration camp. After being stripped, kicked, beaten and abused, she was shot in the head the morning of September 13, 1944. Her last word was “Liberte!” She was only 30.

The other three SOE women were also shot and the bodies of all four were burned in the Dachau crematorium. Of the more than 200 captured field agents of the French SOE, only 26 survived. It was a matter of German policy to kill them. Since she was working as a civilian, she was not protected by the Geneva Conventions. By volunteering to work for the SOE in France, Noor had condemned herself to almost certain

death. How extraordinarily brave of her!

Please view the six 10-minute segments of a moving and atmospheric BBC documentary about [Noor on YouTube](#). It's well worth doing.

## Inayati Sufi Values and Influences on Noor

What were some Inayati Sufi values and influences that Noor brought into her WWII service? These seem to have been prominent:

- Although growing up as a harp and veena player and a children's writer-broadcaster with a dreamy disposition, her will was powerful and her focus exact, enabling her to survive almost impossible conditions in France and Germany for so very long.
- She chose to be nonviolent, refusing, for example, to take the service revolver she was issued with on her mission to France.
- She instead used the air waves as her “weapon,” reminding us of part of Hazrat Inayat Khan's healing prayer *Nayaz*: “...through the waves of the air....”
- No one was betrayed and no intelligence was given away by her to the Gestapo.
- Her last word, “Liberte,” was indeed the word of the French resistance. At the same time she was being liberated from the sufferings of this earthly life, which is why we Sufis celebrate the day of death, the *Urs*, as the “wedding day.”
- All in all, she let her light shine into the darkest dark.

You may wish to read this article, from *Sufi* magazine's Autumn–Winter 2010 issue (no. 80), by Yousef Daoud (Joe Martin), which adds a lot to our understanding of the Inayati influences on Noor in her war service (thanks to the editors for their permission): [Daughter of Sufism](#).

He concludes: “She reminds us that in this existence we play many roles, but also live in the web of all-Being. Her life is also a reminder that one can surrender self to serve a greater Self, which flows with all, through all, creating a virtue that transcends mere ethics, as it leads one home.”

## After WWII

On February 24, 1944, Noor was recommended for the George Medal, a British award for gallantry. It was not yet known in Britain that Noor had been killed. Noor was recommended in September 1945 to be appointed as a Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE). It was still not yet known in Britain that Noor had been killed. On January 16, 1946, she was awarded the *Croix de Guerre* with Gold Star, France's highest civilian award. It was not until 1947 that Noor's fate became known.

On April 5, 1949, Noor was posthumously awarded the George Cross, which is the highest award a civilian in Britain can receive. Her name is found on plaques at Dachau, Fazal Manzil, St Paul's Church in Knightsbridge London, the Memorial Gates to Commonwealth soldiers near Hyde Park Corner London, and at the RAF Memorial at Runnymede, where the very first Bill of Rights was signed by King John in 1215. There is still no permanent memorial to her.

## The Noor Inayat Khan London Statue Project

Shrabani Basu, author of *Spy Princess* (2006), from which the above narrative is taken, was so moved by Noor's story that she determined that there should be a fitting individual memorial to her in London. So she set up the Noor Inayat Khan Memorial Trust. Its web site is [www.noormemorial.org](http://www.noormemorial.org), where more details of the project can be found. The memorial trust is a registered UK charity (nonprofit).

Following the campaign to install a permanent memorial in her honor in London, an Early Day Motion was tabled in the House of Commons on June 22, 2010 by Valerie Vaz, Member of Parliament (MP). It was signed by 34 MPs and received cross-party support. In September 2010, the Vice Chancellor of the University of London gave permission for the memorial and bust to be installed in Gordon Square, close to the house where Noor lived in WWII and to the house from which she left on her fatal 1943 mission. It will be sculpted by well-known artist Karen Newman ([www.karen-newman.com](http://www.karen-newman.com)), who has sculpted busts of such distinguished people as the Duke of Edinburgh. She has also sculpted the bust of Violette Szabo, another SOE spy dropped behind enemy lines in 1944 and quickly killed. This bust has been located on the Albert Embankment in central London since 2008.

The memorial in Gordon Square will be the first for a woman of Asian ancestry in the UK. It will stand for peace and religious harmony, the principles Noor Inayat Khan believed in.

The project is estimated to cost £80,000 (about \$125,000). Almost £46,000 (less than 60%) has been raised as of September 2011. There is still a long way to go.

- See Shrabani Basu speaking briefly at the site of the proposed memorial [here](#).
- See photos of the site and related sculptures [here](#).
- See a five-minute video with more photos of Noor and an update on the project [here](#).

## Coordination of the Project in the Ruhaniat Community

Roger Raja Pritchard has taken on the responsibility of coordination.

Why so? He was born in February 1940 close to Manchester England, and remembers vividly the air raid sirens, the bombers, the air fights, the bombs, and the air raid shelters of his young childhood. Having personally experienced the threats to freedom and democracy in WWII, he is deeply moved by the extreme courage of Noor. If you are moved help him with this project, he would be grateful; his contact information is at the end of this article.

The Golden Gate Sufi Circle (GGSC) has taken on the role of nonprofit fiscal sponsor.

## Contribution Details

Checks are preferred. (PayPal deducts a fee.) Make checks payable to "Golden Gate Sufi Circle." Be sure to write "Noor Memorial fund" on the memo line of your check.

Send checks c/o Roger Pritchard, 1514 McGee Ave, Berkeley, CA 94703

To donate with your credit or debit card, visit PayPal.com. Sign in to your account, go to the "Send Money" tab and enter [gpsc@goldengatesufi.org](mailto:gpsc@goldengatesufi.org) in the "To" box. Enter the amount; then click the "Gift" button in the "Personal" section; then hit "Continue." On the next screen, scroll to the bottom section ("Email to recipient") and, in the "Message" box, be sure to type "Noor Memorial fund" as well as your full legal name and address to ensure you can receive a gift acknowledgement for tax purposes.

Letters acknowledging contributions from the past calendar year are sent out by GGSC by the end of February of the following year.

Any further questions? Please contact Roger at [roger.pritchard@mindspring.com](mailto:roger.pritchard@mindspring.com)

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### URLs for links:

#### Noor on YouTube:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3JRYeo3kQ4E&feature=related>

#### "Daughter of Sufism" article:

[http://ruhaniat.org/pdf/Noor\\_I\\_K\\_Sufi\\_Journal.pdf](http://ruhaniat.org/pdf/Noor_I_K_Sufi_Journal.pdf)

#### Shrabani Basu speaking at Gordon Square:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dJF2VEjMQgg>

#### Photos of the Noor memorial site and related sculptures:

[http://ruhaniat.org/pdf/Noor\\_I\\_K\\_memorial\\_photos.pdf](http://ruhaniat.org/pdf/Noor_I_K_memorial_photos.pdf)

#### Five-minute project update:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Kx0yNu-aa8>