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Victor Gollancz Esq.,
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23rd July 1951

Dear Mr. Gollancz,

I have written a biography of the late Miss Noor Inayat Khan, George Cross, M.B.E., Croix de Guerre with Vermillion Star. This is not exactly a war book, although it is about a person whose greatest ever achievement was in the war, and Miss Elizabeth Wiskermann has suggested I should send it to you as a person who would understand the rather special problem involved. The child of an Indian father (a Sufi mystic) and an American mother, born in Moscow and brought up in France, she cannot be an English heroine although she died in the service of Britain.

Another snag is that although she was shot at Dachau, what I have written is not a book against the Germans. She fought for freedom, but had no nationalist consciousness, and indeed, being a mystic, she did not even hate those against whom she was fighting – a thing people here find hard to understand. I should be betraying her, if I were to resort to blackening those on the other side as the means of throwing up her courage. Indeed, in fact, she was held in the highest respect by the Germans who captured her, and they have been extraordinarily generous in giving me every assistance in reconstructing her story from the moment when she fell into their hands. (I made my enquiries as a private person and they were not obliged to tell me anything.) Indeed, it is a paradox I have found, that nowhere is she so highly honoured as amongst those who had least interest to be sensitive to the qualities of a British agent.

Although I have spared no pains to establish the facts of her history during her mission and after capture – I have devoted two years to an enquiry upon the Continent – it is always her character which is the subject of the book. It is not a war story, but the biography of a very exceptional person.

I have considered the early part of her life to be as important as her mission. I have started with her birth in 1914, and built up her character through her childhood and youngest girlhood in the bosom of her family and the ambience of the Sufi Movement, founded by her father in the suburb of Suresnes, near Paris. In this movement, which undoubtedly played a large part in the formation of her outlook, the respect of all peoples and their beliefs was taught as a fundamental principle. In the Sufi service a candle was lighted to each one of the great religions of the world, Hindu, Zoroastrian, Hebrew, Christian and the religion of Islam. She herself was considerably read in Oriental philosophy, and drew most of her spiritual food from the Bhagavad Gita. She also studied both Indian and Western music, played and composed for piano and harp, and performed at the Salle Erard. Her most important occupation, before the war however was writing. She had studied Child Psychology, and wrote for the Children's Page of the Sunday Figaro, and for the Children's Hour of both Radio Paris and the B.B.C. In 1959 she had published by Harrap a book of Buddhist legends adapted for children under the title, "Twenty Jataka Tales". Her next enterprise was to have been a children's newspaper, "Bel Age". She had found a House in Paris to bring it out, and just seen the first number in page proof, when war began and the project had to be cancelled.

When France was invaded, she thought she ought to serve with the Democracies, and in June 1940 she came to England with her mother, brother and sister. She volunteered almost immediately, for the W.A.A.F. and was accepted after some insistence, having been at first refused because she was not a British subject. (She had a British Protected Person's passport.) She was trained from the first as a Wireless Operator. When, in 1942, she was interviewed for a commission, a very difficult position presented itself. One of the Board of about fourteen officers examining her asked if she would feel a first loyalty to the Indian leaders Gandhi and Nehru or to the British Government, and whether she would feel obliged to support the Indian leaders if they should prescribe measures embarrassing to the British Government could count upon her loyal service, but that after it had been won she would feel it her duty to support the Indian leaders, even in measures embarrassing to Britain.

Her stout answer was respected, and shortly afterwards she was put in touch by the Air Ministry with the Special Operations Executive, which was sending agents to work in France. She volunteered immediately for a mission, and after a short training was infiltrated, on June 16th 1943, to work as a Radio Operator in the Paris area.

By unlucky chance, she arrived just on the eve of the biggest single coup ever made by the Gestapo in France, and had only been there ten days when all the members of the group she had been sent to assist were arrested. The War Office offered to send a plane to bring her back, but she refused, saying she realised the holocaust had left her the only Radio Operator in the Paris Area, and if she returned London would have no line of communication with the French capital. In the War Office it was realised that if she stayed she was almost bound to be captured, yet so great was the military interest of her remaining at what had become overnight the most important post in France, that since she was willing to make the sacrifice they accepted it. For four and a half months, she continued alone, the only British officer in the Paris area, working with such French groups as she could discover, and organise the supply to them of arms and materials from London.

In October she was sold to the Gestapo for 100,000 francs by a French traitor. I have met, and taken a personal statement from the man who negotiated the transaction, made the arrest, and had the entire charge of her case during the six weeks she was held at the Headquarters of the Gestapo in Paris, when he interrogated her every single day. He has the deepest possible appreciation of her character, and states that she showed the firmest morale of all the prisoners that went through his hands during the whole period of his service. (He handled nearly all the important British agents. He affirms she was the most important of the British agents in France.)

To all his questions, she replied simply, "I won't tell you," but was otherwise quite friendly. She made three attempts to escape, and after the last was asked by the Chief of the Gestapo to sign a declaration that she would make no more; otherwise she must be transferred to the severest conditions of detention. She refused to give the undertaking he asked, and was sent to a small civil prison in Germany, where she was kept for ten months, during some uncertain period in chains hands and feet. (She was supposed to be kept like this all the time, but it seems that the staff released her when it was not too dangerous.)

The Governor and the Guards of the Prison, with whom I have spoken, hold her still in the highest esteem, not least because, despite her unhappy situation, she displayed to the end an unembittered and cheerful stoicism. She talked about Indian philosophy to the 70 year old Governor, when he came in and sat down with her sometimes on the bed – all this quite contrary to the Gestapo prescription that even he must never speak with her; and the Guards recall her unaffected friendliness – though everyone realised she was doomed to die. On September 12, 1944, she was collected and taken to Dachau, where she was collected and taken to Dachau, where she was shot immediately. I have a long personal letter from the transport official who took her.

You will see that many of these people have given me great confidence, such as were hardly in their interest, because of their admiration for the girl, and I cannot repay them by writing in a way to make them appear as monsters. Indeed, I have investigated this matter very thoroughly – taking also statements from other Allied persons who were prisoners at the same time – and it is my opinion that although the conditions were severe, for reasons of security, she was treated as well as it is possible considering how dangerous an enemy she was to the Reich.

I should say that I knew her personally, both in France before the war and in England during the period of her service with the W.A.A.F. and training for her mission. She used to stay with me when she had leave, and I have described many of our conversations about spiritual and other matters, Indian affairs, literature, forms of belief etc.

I have wanted to avoid this being considered purely as a war book and judged for something it is not. I have therefore thought a good deal about the title, and debated whether to use simply her name, Noor Inayat Khan – perhaps difficult for English people to pronounce – or some phrase which would interpret the matter; perhaps "Faithful Steward". This would give some indication of the moral force of the character, and embrace her career almost from the beginning when she was just thirteen, when her father died and her mother collapsed, and she took over the entire government of the house and guardianship of the three younger children. It was the consciousness of responsibility which characterised her, and in the deepest sense she was a steward all her life. But the title can be decided later.

If you are interested, I will send you the manuscript. It is about 120,000 words and I have plenty of photographs and material for illustrations.

Yours sincerely
Miss Jean V. Overton Fuller

* retyped from the original, which is in the Imperial War Museum archive