Joséphine Baker, the Résistante

Giving back to France
"My only weapon is my heart" — J. Baker
The Humanist:
Helped refugees, supported the troops, & saved lives

• Even before the war, Baker recognized Nazis as racists; for her : « All men must live as brothers »,

• This evidence of brotherhood and racial tolerance will have guided her steps throughout the whole war,

• In 1939, refugees from occupied Belgium and Holland arrived in France. While still performing shows, in the daytime she worked at a center for Belgian refugees (Gare du Nord) where she supported management costs

• Later as a licensed pilot, she enrolled in the « Infirmières Pilotes des Services Sanitaires » (Nurse section) and flew supplies to vital areas for the Red Cross,

• To support the troops and sustain the population’s morale:
  • She adapted her show in 1939 to enliven the French army at the Maginot Line,
  • Sent packages to the front during the « Phony war» (paying for their contents & deliveries) & wrote to her 4000 godsons of war,
  • In March 1943, the director of Red Cross affairs for Black American Soldiers asked her to perform again. She agreed to go back on stage for them after 19 months in a hospital,
  • She then performed regularly for the French, the British, and the US soldiers in North Africa
  • She even organized specific performances for the Free French soldiers with no civilians and no admission charge.
  • She also insisted that Black and the local Arab population were invited to the receptions she attended,
  • In October 1944, she returned to France to perform all over the country for Army posts and hospitals, putting her in huge debt
  • The last stop of her tour was Buchenwald (Germany) where she sang in a room full of « untransportables ».

• In the 50s, she was a valued member of the LICA & LICRA (International League Against Antisemitism & International League Against Racism) to combat racial, religious, and social discrimination,
The Rebel: Standing-up against the Nazism from the start

- From Day 1 (Sept. 1939, when France declared war on Nazi Germany after the invasion of Poland), Baker declared herself ready to fight and die for France,

- She asked to be recruited and was contacted by Captain Abtey of the 2nd Bureau, the French Military intelligence was willing to use her fame and access to powerful people to gather information,

- In June 1940, when German troops entered the French capital, she left refusing to perform in occupied Paris,

- On June 18, 1940, when De Gaulle declared himself Head of the free French Forces, Baker saw him right away as the legitimate French leader,

- While in Spain, in 1941, she did not hesitate to tell the press that she wouldn’t return to Paris until the Nazis had left, and criticized the artists performing there,

- Standing up against Marshal Petain who surrendered to the Germans and complied with their racial policies, she remained unwaveringly faithful to de Gaulle.
As an « Honorable Correspondent », then as a military officer, Joséphine Baker took part in secret service affairs to pass on key information to the Allies by:

- attending receptions in embassies, mingling with top diplomats & Head of States to gather intel,
- bringing valuable information written in invisible ink on her music sheets with a deconcerting self-assurance,
- crossing borders without raising suspicion: the celebrity of Baker opens borders and got visas for her « protégés » (starting with the Counterintelligence Captain Abtey disguised as her Assistant & the Jewish family of her ex-husband),

- While in Spain in 1941, she also made notes on small papers that she pinned inside her underwear,
- In Casablanca, when Abtey did not obtain his visa for Lisbon, she took off after him to meet Intelligence officers with her music sheets full of blueprints of German military installations,

- From June 1941 to Dec. 1942, despite her illness, Baker stayed in Casablanca to continue. In her hospital room, she received frequent visits – many from American vice-consuls picking up intel transmitted by Abtey about the preparation of the North Africa Allied invasion,

- In 1942, she knew that the Germans were aware of her activities, but she continued on despite frequent warnings,
- In May 1944, she was formally enlisted in the French Air Force until the end of the war as a Sublieutenant,
- In July 1944, she joined the service of emergencies liaisons and then got assigned to the 117 batalion of the Air Force,
- In Oct, 1946, she received the Medal of Resistance (in a Neuilly’s clinic); in a personal letter, the General de Gaulle thanked her for her service and « the enthusiasm with which she had dedicated her talent to the cause of the Resistance », the Medal of the France Libre & the Medal of the commemoration of the 39-45 war,

- She also received the Croix de Guerre with one Palm and the Legion of Honor in 1961 for her military service.
The Influencer & Fundraiser

Propaganda:

- Josephine Baker understood that de Gaulle was not perceived by all Allies as the possible French ruler, by the U.S. particularly, & Baker knew that she had to convince them because she was also certain that Americans would intervene,
- Starting in 1943, she turned herself to a convincing diplomat to persuade the leaders that de Gaulle was the true and only official representative of the Free France & the right French army,
- While in North Africa (in 1940 and onward), feeling a deep affinity for Arab life, she befriended close family members of the powerful Pasha of Marrakesh, Si Thami el Glaoui, who supported de Gaulle,
- At the end of every performance, she displayed a huge French flag exhibiting the Cross of Lorraine, de Gaulle’s symbol,
- In 1943, the powerful Si Mohammed Menebhi (brother-in-law of the Sultan of Marrakech) accompanied her during one of her tours during which they met local leaders; he wore a Cross of Lorraine on his djellabah and travelled in Baker’s Jeep, sleeping by the road on the soil (3000 km and then back, copying with the hard and risky soldier’s life),
- During this Middle East tour, the King Farouk (Egypt) asked her to sing, she politely refused since Egypt had an ambiguous position with de Gaulle, but later in Cairo, she accepted a show presided by the King and the performance was deemed an honor to ties between the Free Forces and Egypt, it was a true diplomatic « tour de force ».

Fundraising:

- Another official long musical tour of the Middle East (done under the patronage of de Gaulle) was organized; at all stops in Syria, Palestine, Lebanon, Libye, Israel, she raised benefits for the Resistance providing 3,143,000 francs and public recognition that went far beyond for the General and his cause,
- She also auctioned her « precious » gold Croix de Lorraine offered by the General de Gaulle himself;
- Between 1943 & 1944, she gave the social services of the French Air Force more than 10 millions francs directly financing many performances and tours.
The Heroine:
Ready to fight for the cause & reinvent her career

• On countless occasions, she showed strength, courage, and self sacrifice starting with her answer to Captain Abtey « I am ready Captain to give them my life. You can use me as you wish. »

• Early 1940, suspected of concealing arms, the Germans searched Les Milandes. Her assurance saved the life of the circle of resisters and refugees that she harbored,

• At that time, she also accepted that the Captain was directly linked to her name on his visa as « accompanies Madame Josephine Baker », which means direct exposure if his real identity was discovered,

• To protect others in France and then in North Africa, she built a wartime family:
  • getting passports & exit visas to Jews & others threatened by Nazis’ policies, starting with Frédéric Rey (a dancer from Austria), Rodolphe Solmsen (a German-born movie producer) and in 1941 her ex-husband, Jean Lion, who was Jewish,
  • To facilitate the departure of agents for England, she set an artistic company with them,
  • While in Marseille -still in the Free zone in 1940 & « Capital of the intelligences » – she was with no money and no reason to be there, so she made up one by adapting « La Créole » the Offenbach operetta in order to pursue her mission,
  • In 1943, during one of the shows for the Allied soldiers in North Africa, despite a bombing raid, she decided to continue singing, knowing that the soldiers had to stay put,

• She is the 1st woman from the U.S. to receive military recognition at her funeral in 1975. She will be the 1st Black woman to enter the French Pantheon.