

# ENGLISH

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## JOSEPHINE BAKER, LEGEND



Entertainer Josephine Baker grew up poor in the slums of St. Louis, before garnering fame in Paris as a nightclub artist, movie star and businesswoman, far from the strictures of legal segregation in America. But Baker's roles also included a spy against the Nazis, and a pilot for the French Air Force during World War

II. Her wartime exploits and social activism have led her to become the first Black woman inducted into France's Panthéon of national heroes. Correspondent Elizabeth Palmer talks with one of Baker's adopted children –

the racially diverse "Rainbow Tribe" – about the incomparable Baker's life and legacy.**DEC 5, 2021**

#### IN HER OWN WORDS: JOSEPHINE BAKER QUOTES

1. "All my life, I have maintained that the people of the world can learn to live together in peace if they are not brought up in prejudice."

- Josephine Baker.

2. "I shall dance all my life. . . . I would like to die, breathless, spent, at the end of a dance."

- Josephine Baker.

3. "Art is an elastic sort of love."

- Josephine Baker.

4. "I believe in prayer. It's the best way we have to draw strength from heaven."

- Josephine Baker.

5. "I like Frenchmen very much, because even when they insult you they do it so nicely."

- Josephine Baker.

6. "Since I personified the savage on the stage, I tried to be as civilized as possible in daily life."

- Josephine Baker.

7. "I love performing. I shall perform until the day I die."

- Josephine Baker.

8. "One dance had made me the most famous colored woman in the world."

- Josephine Baker.

9. "God dislikes evil, and no happiness can be built on hate. Love one another as brothers."

- Josephine Baker.

10. "Oh, you young people act like old men. You have no fun."

- Josephine Baker.

11. "I have never really been a great artist. I have been a human being that has loved art, which is not the same thing."  
- Josephine Baker.

12. "I have two loves: my country and Paris."  
- Josephine Baker.

13. "I want to live in peace surrounded by children and animals. "  
- Josephine Baker.

14. "On the contrary, I have been very proud of my start, because it has made me remain human, and in that way understand my fellow brothers of misery."  
- Josephine Baker.

15. "The things we truly love stay with us always, locked in our hearts as long as life remains."  
- Josephine Baker.

16. "Surely the day will come when color means nothing more than the skin tone, when religion is seen uniquely as a way to speak one's soul, when birth places have the weight of a throw of the dice and all men are born free, when understanding breeds love and brotherhood."

WHICH QUOTE IS YOUR FAVORITE? WHY?



## Josephine Baker's Daring Double Life as a World War II Spy

Using fame as a cover, the glamorous entertainer spied for the French Resistance against the Nazis.

As war drums reverberated across Europe in 1939, the head of France's military intelligence service recruited an unlikely spy: France's most famous woman—[Josephine Baker](#).

Jacques Abtey had spent the early days of [World War II](#) recruiting spies to collect information on [Nazi Germany](#) and other Axis powers. Typically, the secret service chief sought out men who could travel incognito. Then again, nothing was typical when it came to the American-born dancer and singer.

Born into poverty in St. Louis in 1906, Baker had grown up fatherless in a series of rat-infested hovels. She had only sporadic schooling and married for the first time at age 13. Stung by discrimination in [Jim Crow](#) America based on her skin color, she left at the age of 19 to perform as a burlesque dancer in the music halls of Paris where her risqué dance routines while clad in little more than a string of pearls and a rubber banana skirt made her a [Jazz Age](#) sensation. After branching out into singing and acting in films, she became Europe's highest-paid entertainer.

A celebrity of Baker's stature made for a most unlikely spy candidate since she could never travel surreptitiously—but that's exactly what made her



such an enticing prospect. Fame would be her cover. Abtey hoped Baker could use her charm, beauty and stardom to seduce secrets from the lips of fawning diplomats at embassy parties.

Having found in France the freedom that America promised on parchment, Baker agreed to spy for her adopted country. "France made me what I am," [she told Abtey](#). "The Parisians gave me their hearts, and I am ready to give them my life."

The cries of "Go back to Africa!" she had heard from fascists while performing across Europe also fueled her decision. "Of course I wanted to do all I could to aid France, my adopted country," [she told Ebony](#) magazine decades later, "but an overriding consideration, the thing that drove me as strongly as did patriotism, was my violent hatred of discrimination in any form."

Baker started her espionage career by attending diplomatic parties at the Italian and Japanese embassies and gathering intelligence about the Axis powers possibly joining the war. Showing no fear of being caught, the neophyte spy wrote notes of what she overheard on the palms of her hand and on her arms under her sleeves. "Oh, nobody would think I'm a spy," [Baker said](#) with a laugh when Abtey warned her of the danger.

In the weeks after German forces [roared into France](#), Baker continued her nightly performances in Paris, sang to soldiers on the warfront over the radio and comforted refugees in homeless shelters. When the invaders closed in on Paris in early June 1940, Abtey insisted that she leave, so Baker loaded her possessions, including a gold piano and a bed once owned by [Marie-](#)

[Antoinette](#), into vans and departed for a chateau 300 miles to the southwest. As Nazi troops goose-stepped down the Champs-Élysées and occupied her Paris home, Baker hid refugees and French Resistance members in her new

In November 1940, Abtey and Baker worked to smuggle documents to General Charles de Gaulle and the [Free French government](#) in exile in London. Under the guise of embarking on a South American tour, the entertainer hid secret photographs under her dress and carried along sheet music with information about German troop movements in France written in invisible ink. With all eyes transfixed on the star as they crossed the border to Spain on their way to neutral Portugal, the French security chief, who posed as Baker's secretary, garnered little notice from German officials. The limelight that Baker attracted allowed Abtey to travel in the shadows.

In Portugal and Spain, Baker continued to harvest details about Axis troop movements at embassy parties. Squirreling away in bathrooms, the secret agent made detailed notes and attached them to her bra with a safety pin. "My notes would have been highly compromising had they been discovered, but who would dare search Josephine Baker to the skin?" [she later wrote](#). "When they asked *me* for papers, they generally meant autographs."

Today we are also on UNIT 5 of your book (LANGUAGE HUB): pp.44-50



Josephine Baker (right) pictured in her military uniform as *a member of the Fighting French Women's Corps in North Africa.*

Ordered to Morocco in January 1941 to set up a liaison and transmission center in Casablanca, Abtey and Baker sailed across the Mediterranean Sea. The performer brought along 28 pieces of luggage and a menagerie of pet monkeys, mice and a Great Dane. The more conspicuous Baker's travel, the fewer suspicions it generated.

In North Africa she worked with the French Resistance network and used her connections to secure passports for Jews fleeing the Nazis in Eastern Europe until she was hospitalized with peritonitis in June 1941. She underwent multiple operations during an 18-month hospitalization that left her so ill that the *Chicago Defender* mistakenly ran her obituary, penned by Langston Hughes. [He wrote](#) that Baker was "as much a victim of Hitler as the soldiers who fall today in Africa fighting his armies. The Aryans drove Josephine away from her beloved Paris." Baker quickly corrected the record. "There



has been a slight error, I'm much too busy to die," [she told](#) the *Afro-American*.

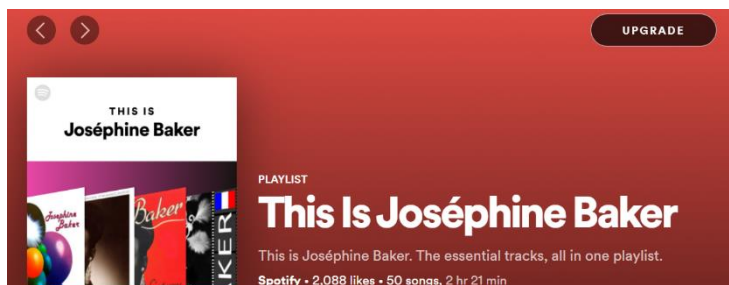
Even as Baker convalesced, the spy work continued as American diplomats and French Resistance members convened at her bedside. From her balcony she watched as American troops arrived in Morocco as part of Operation Torch in November 1942. After she was finally discharged, Baker toured Allied military camps from Algiers to Jerusalem. By day, she rode in jeeps across the scorching deserts of North Africa. At night, she bundled up and slept on the ground next to her vehicle to avoid land mines.

Following the [liberation of Paris](#), she returned to the city she loved in October 1944 after a four-year absence. Dressed in her blue air auxiliary lieutenant's uniform punctuated with gold epaulettes, Baker rode in the back of an automobile as the throngs along the Champs-Élysées tossed her flowers. No longer just a glamorous revue star, Baker was a patriotic heroine.

She donned her uniform once again in 1961 to receive two of France's highest military honors, the Croix de Guerre and the Legion of Honor, at a ceremony in which details of her espionage work were revealed to the world. A teary-eyed Baker [told her countrymen](#), "I am proud to be French because this is the only place in the world where I can realize my dream."

### [CHRISTOPHER KLEIN](#)

<https://www.history.com/news/josephine-baker-world-war-ii-spy>



Listen to Josephine Baker here



