When the world turned away, one American led the most determined and successful American rescue operation of the Nazi era.

Mary Jayne Gold
(1909-1997)
prior to World War II
Varian Fry (1907-1967) in Marseille in 1941
No stamp for the 100th anniversary of his birth

Miriam Davenport Ebel (1915-1999)
prior to World War II

Charles Fawcett (1915-2008)
in Ambulance Corps uniform
Hiram Bingham IV (1903-1988)
righteous vice-consul in 1940-41, stamp issued in May 2006
Leon Ball

“In all we saved some two thousand human beings. We ought to have saved many times that number. But we did what we could.”

Varian Fry

Viewed within the context of its times, Fry’s mission in Marseille, France, in 1940-41 seems not "merely" an attempt to save some threatened writers, artists, and political figures. It appears in hindsight like a doomed final quest to reverse the very direction in which the world—and not merely the Nazis—was heading.

from Varian Fry in Marseille, by Pierre Sauvage

We are very sad to announce the death of our friend Charles Fernley Fawcett. We will not see the likes of him again soon.
We wish we could have cheered the publication in 2006 of the book Villa Air-Bel, dealing with the Varian Fry mission...

Rosemary Sullivan's book Villa Bel-Air and its improper use of Mary Jayne Gold's Crossroads Marseilles 1940

And Crown Thy Good

Varian Fry in Marseille
an upcoming feature documentary by the filmmaker of Weapons of the Spirit
screenings of excerpts from the work-in-progress by have begun...

In a challenging time, Varian Fry, Miriam Davenport Ebel, Mary Jayne Gold, Charles Fawcett, Leon Ball and Hiram Bingham IV, were Americans who joined with others in the U.S. and in Marseille, France, to further brotherhood from sea to shining sea...

We believe that at least seven non-Jews who worked with Varian Fry in Marseille would be worthy of joining Varian Fry as Righteous Among the Nations, a distinction granted by Israel's Yad Vashem memorial:

- Leon F. Ball, USA
- Daniel Bénédite, France
- Hiram Bingham IV, USA
- Miriam Davenport Ebel, USA
- Charles Fawcett, USA
- Jean Gemähling, France
- Mary Jayne Gold, USA

In February 1941, in Marseille, France, an American wrote to his wife back in New York:

Among the people who have come into my office, or with whom I am in constant correspondence, are not only some of the greatest living authors, painters, sculptors of Europe . . . but also former cabinet ministers and even prime ministers of half a dozen countries. What a strange place Europe is when men like this are reduced to waiting patiently in the anteroom of a young American of no importance whatever.
Varian Fry, the young American, was 32 when he arrived in Marseille early in the morning of Aug. 14, 1940—only two months after France’s traumatizing defeat by the Nazis, and a full year and a half before Americans finally allowed themselves to get dragged into the war.

In that summer of 1940, high-level Nazis were talking among themselves about the need for a final solution to the Jewish question, but there is no evidence that anybody was seriously thinking of mass murder. Throughout the coming year, the German policy would remain one of emigration and resettlement.

What was possible when Fry arrived in Europe would, however, no longer be possible by the time Fry left Europe at the end of October 1941. By then, it wouldn’t only be the doors of the U.S. and other Western countries that were largely closed to refugees; the doors of departure from Europe would be shut too, and the Final Solution would be underway.

These are the circumstances in which a New York intellectual led what we know to have been the most determined and successful private American rescue operation during World War II. At a time of tragic American apathy about the refugee crisis in Europe, Varian Fry was assisted locally in his struggle by other singular and similarly non-Jewish Americans: the late Miriam Davenport Ebel, Mary Jayne Gold, Charles Fawcett, and Leon Ball, as well as the late righteous consul Hiram Bingham IV.

Banding together with Jewish and non-Jewish refugees from the Third Reich, as well as early French opponents to Vichy, this tiny group, with erratic assistance from colleagues in New York, may have helped to save as many as 2,000 people: Marc Chagall, Max Ernst, Jacques Lipchitz, Heinrich Mann, Franz Werfel, Alma Mahler Werfel, André Breton, Victor Serge, André Masson, Lion Feuchtwanger, Konrad Heiden, Marcel Duchamp, Hannah Arendt, Max Ophuls, Walter Mehring, Jean Malaquais, Valeriu Marcu, Remedios Varo, Otto Meyerhof... The list—Fry’s list—goes on and on.

“There is a fire sale on brains going on here, and we aren’t taking full advantage of it,” an American official in Lisbon told Fry in August 1940, long before the Holocaust became established as a metaphor. Even if many of the names on Fry’s list have faded into relative obscurity, the list as a whole represents much of the intelligentsia of Europe at that time; the population shifts Fry helped produce would have major ramifications for American culture.

Though Fry was not specifically concerned with saving Jews—and indeed the German and Austrian anti-Nazi émigrés in France then seemed the most vulnerable of all, whether Jewish or not—Fry became in 1998 the first American singled out to be honored as a Righteous Among the Nations by Israel’s Yad Vashem, the Jerusalem memorial to the Holocaust.
Many basic facts about the man and his mission are still unfamiliar even to scholars, while some of what is “known” is in fact erroneous or misleading. Furthermore, there have been no attempts as yet to place the rescue effort in its full historical context.

Filling some of these gaps and drawing on extensive research and over one hundred and fifty interviews conducted for the author's upcoming feature documentary, And Crown Thy Good: Varian Fry in Marseille, this account of the mission will lead naturally enough to some fundamental questions about what we are to make of it, what still remains unknown, and whether the story is more than a mere footnote, however culturally significant, in the history of the Holocaust.

NEW World War II magazine, March 2008: Rescue Mission to Vichy: American Varian Fry saved a generation of France's greatest artists from the Nazis

NEW The swashbuckling Charles Fernley Fawcett

Varian Fry et le Centre américain de secours par Pierre Sauvage (in French)

On Mary Jayne Gold, with excerpts from her published memoir Crossroads Marseille 1940, which chronicles her participation in the rescue effort

Oh You Must Not Peek Under My Sunbonnet, the first peek at Mary Jayne Gold's delightful, still unpublished memoir of her early years

Americans Who Cared and why we should care about them

Tribute to Miriam Davenport Ebel, Varian Fry's close aide who died September 13, 1999, at the age of 84

An Unsentimental Education, Miriam Davenport Ebel's memoir of 1940

The Indomitable Lisa Fittko

A Hero Of Our Own: The Story of Varian Fry, a biography (2001) by Sheila Isenberg

A Quiet American: The Secret War of Varian Fry, a biography (1999) by Andy Marino

Interview with Andy Marino


Question: what is copyrighted in a memoir?

Some of the 2,000 people helped...

Officers of the Emergency Rescue Committee

Crossroads Marseille—the movie project

Varian’s War, 2001 Showtime movie, which purported to be about Varian Fry
Annette Riley Fry, second wife of Varian Fry
A quick list of some of my objections:

* To be expected, of course, actual events in which Fry was involved are distorted and many unlikely "events" are made up. But not to be expected is that the actual historical situation in Marseille is misrepresented, or that the founding of the ERC (Emergency Rescue Committee) is so fudged; and that IRC (today's wonderful worldwide International Rescue Committee) is given no mention in the end listings), and that a woman with utterly no resemblance in appearance or voice to our beloved Eleanor Roosevelt is made to play her part in a phony episode.

* The dimensions of the threat of the Holocaust (identified as "The Massacre of the Jews" in a landmark 1942 article by Fry before the word Holocaust came into use) is watered down. If you didn't know World War II history (as many TV viewers and most young people don't), you wouldn't be at all sure why the "refugees" in the film were in danger.

* The name-dropping of "famous" refugees I found boring and repetitious. If I hadn't known who they were--and I fear most people don't these days--I would be bewildered by these characters. Even knowing who they were supposed to be, I couldn't keep the actors straight.

* The un-famous people Fry and his fellow workers became more and more concerned about are quickly dismissed. One gets the impression that Fry was only interested in the elite.
* The refugees all look pretty prosperous and well fed to me. Since we haven't been given a sense of their peril, we might wonder: what's the big deal?

* Fry is depicted by the aging William Hurt (with an absurd toupee) as a ludicrous Woody Allen type--a nerd, and a silly fop who lets someone named "Miriam Davenport" show him what to do. Hurt can be a fine actor. I have to suspect that [Lionel] Chetwynd is a mediocre director as well as writer. And naturally I resent that Fry is made to seem swissy and weak; and that no mention is made in the listings at the end of the film that after the war he re-married and had three children.

* Dreariest of all, this film is overly long--2 hours--and a bore. Yes, just plain boring!

**Fry Colleague Charles Fernley Fawcett**

My recollection of Varian Fry was that he was an idealistic, intelligent and sophisticated person, who was completely dedicated to and involved with the task. He used incredibly deep understanding of his problem and devoted every waking moment to this project. Knowing him so well, I saw absolutely nothing in the film that reminds me of him.

**Fry Colleague Marcel Verzeano**

I worked very closely with Varian Fry, in Marseille, for over a year. My main job was to organize and operate various routes of escape for the refugees who had to leave France. During much of that time, Fry and I worked in the same office. We lived in the same house, with several families of refugees and co-workers. We often traveled together to various places in southern France to visit refugees who were in great danger and yet were hesitating to go.

After my arrival in the United States, as an immigrant in 1942, Fry and I kept in touch. While I lived on the east coast, we often met and talked about the old times in Marseille. When I lived on the west coast, we often communicated by letter or telephone. I have known Varian Fry really well.

He was a highly intelligent man of great courage and determination. There was nothing in him of the awkward, timid, and bumbling individual presented in Varian's War. This film portrays a very distorted picture of Varian Fry and what he accomplished in France in 1940 and 1941.
One of the scenes in the film shows Fry entering a gay bar, sitting at a table for a while looking around aimlessly, then getting up and leaving. It is difficult to understand the meaning of the scene. If the implication is that Fry may have had any homosexual tendencies, I can say that during all the years I have known him, I have not seen the slightest indication of any such inclination.

Another scene shows Miriam Davenport, one of Fry's associates, trying to raise his interest in her. Miriam did not have the slightest interest in Fry except as a friend and coworker. She had a boyfriend in Slovenia whom she loved very much. Eventually, she traveled to Slovenia, got him out and married him.

At no time did Fry accompany any refugees over the mountains to the Spanish border. Not because he would not have wanted to, but because the danger of being stopped and arrested by the French border guards was too great, and Fry knew, and so did all of us, that without him our organization would fall apart and few refugees would be able to leave.

During the process of finding out which were the safest routes of escape, another associate of Varian's, Daniel Bénédite, and myself, were testing one of the possible passages over the mountains during one night, in the winter of 1940. We were met by the French border guards who fired at us but, luckily, missed us. After we stopped running and talked to them, we escaped being arrested after they checked our backpacks and found nothing suspicious in them.

It would have been foolish of Varian to take the kind of chances they show him taking in the film. Most of the refugees were taken over the mountain by the American Charles Fawcett at the beginning of the operation and by Hans Fittko later on. Fittko, with his wife Lisa, had established himself at the foot of the Pyrenees mountains in Banyuls, and, for a period of over one year, guided a very large number of refugees across.

Among those that Fry's organization saved, there were Catholics, Protestants, Jews and people of other religions. There were rightists, leftists, centrists and people of other political affiliations. There were writers, artists, politicians, and people of all kinds of trades and professions. But they all had one thing in common: they had fought for democracy and freedom with every grain of energy they possessed. This is the essence of Fry's accomplishment. Very little of it comes through in Varian's War.

With the talent and the effort used in making this film, it should have been easy to tell the true story. The fantasy was not necessary.
Dr. Charles Ebel, husband of the late Miriam Davenport Ebel, "portrayed" by Julia Ormond
Miriam would have alternately roared with laughter and screamed with righteous indignation at the stupidity of almost every scene.

William Bingham, son of the late Hiram Bingham IV, one of the heroes of Varian's War
The film is dreadfully inaccurate and demeaning to Fry, Feuchtwanger, Miriam Davenport and others, despite the apparent desire to honor them.

Pierre-Rene Noth, son of the late anti-Nazi refugee writer Ernst Erich Noth in Rome (Georgia) News-Tribune, Sunday, April 29, 2001
One good deed deserves another. Certainly, the good deed that saved my life is deserving of an attempt to save the reputation of the man who did so.

Showtime recently aired a new movie, titled Varian’s War, purported to be the true life story of a genuine American hero named Varian Fry. Before the United States entered World War II he went to France on behalf of the American Emergency Rescue Committee, formed an underground network and arranged the escapes of some of Europe’s top intellectual elite — writers, painters, musicians, even some political leaders — whom the Nazis wanted to apprehend and put into concentration camps. Some, but hardly all, were Jewish.

Fry’s experiences and efforts in 1940-41 are well documented but not well known. Both he and many of his co-conspirators later wrote about what happened. He can probably be placed in the company of the better-known Oskar Schindler and Raoul Wallenberg as one of the war’s great driven-by-conscience heroes.

In 1996, Varian Mackey Fry was named as "Righteous Among the Nations" by Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Heros and Martyrs Remembrance Authority in Jerusalem — the first American recipient of Israel's highest honor for rescuers during The Holocaust.

“In all we saved some two thousand human beings,” Fry wrote. “We ought to have saved many times that number. But we did what we could.” My family constituted five of those 2,000.

I hardly recall the events, having been only 4 at the time. Perhaps, while on my mother’s knee, I might have actually been in Fry’s presence. I don’t know. I have, while doing genealogical research, come up with some letters between my mother, Elena Fels,
an opera singer and Jewish, and the Emergency Rescue Committee that indicate Fry’s group was giving her economic support and planning to get the family out of the country. Whether my father, known by his penname of Ernst Erich Noth, who was a German anti-Nazi novelist in exile and a Lutheran, was aided by Fry I do not know. My father was high on Hitler’s “wanted” list; his books had been burned in Germany as soon as the Nazis took power. I have uncovered papers indicating that he was hidden primarily by members of the Dominican Order, which were also then active in saving all kinds of hunted people from what would later become known as The Holocaust. However it was worked out, my mother, myself, my brother Jean-Sebastien, then age 2, and my grandmother, Betsy Schott Fels, were smuggled across the Pyrenees Mountains into Spain in the summer of 1941 where we met up with my father, who someone — Fry or the Dominicans — had extricated by a separate route.

From there it was on to Portugal by train, passage on the American liner Excambion, and on to New York City where we all entered the country as political refugees granted asylum under emergency conditions. Given what occurred in Nazi-controlled Europe after this time, it is logical to surmise that had Fry not arranged our secret departure I would not be here, nor my brother, nor my two later-arriving siblings, nor our families. I owe Fry the greatest of debts.

This movie does Fry no justice and only injustices. The story took place in Marseilles, France, but Hollywood chose to film it in Montreal, Canada. The truth goes downhill from there. The errors of fact, of character, of history are too numerous to list here. They are listed in some detail at http://www.varianfry.org/varians_war_en.htm where the light of hope for righting this slur upon history also dwells. The Chambon Foundation is working on an actual documentary of Fry’s activities, titled And Crown Thy Good, which is to air on PBS. Real people who worked with Fry, who were saved by Fry, will then tell the story. It is being made by Emmy Award-winning documentary filmmaker Pierre Sauvage, himself like myself the son of parents who were saved from the Holocaust, although by other means as told in his 1989 feature documentary Weapons of the Spirit.

Meanwhile, Fry — played in the movie by William Hurt as a fop of suspicious sexual orientation (Fry was married ... twice ... and had three children) — has been sent to the extermination camps run by the Hollywood Holocaust. So were many of his friends and associates who have been similarly burned in the ovens that currently pass for “entertainment.”

This warping and destruction of history has gotten so bad that Carlin Romano, critic at large for The Chronicle of Higher Education, in commenting on historical novels that ignore history, wrote: “We may retell their stories badly or well. We may embellish them or get them wrong. But we should not do so blithely, just as we should not scrawl
slogans on other people’s houses, or stride into their living rooms to replace the furniture. Thinking that we can is not novel history. It’s novel morality, unworthy of artists and storytellers.” Writing specifically about Varian’s War, also in The Chronicle, about “Debasing History with Bad Fiction,” Dr. Peter I. Rose said: “In the Showtime film, the producers make an earnest attempt to tell the story of a homegrown hero still unknown to most Americans. Unfortunately, what they have wrought does not do justice to the man, his colleagues, or his cause. ... Although [director Lionel] Chetwynd’s interpretation of Fry’s story contains kernels of truth, his film is filled with errors of fact about how the Emergency Rescue Committee and the mission got started, about Fry and his aides, about the selection process, about the role of the French and German authorities. ...Varian’s War is not cinéma vérité, despite the claim of its producers and publicists that theirs is the true story. Those familiar with what actually happened will find the historical distortions inexcusable and are bound to wince at the caricaturing of the rescuers and asylum-seekers.”

The only real value of this film is in beginning to call America’s attention to one of its forgotten heroes — a man who acted out of conscience and not under orders from his country (which actually often tried to stop him and even reprimanded him for his efforts). It is a story of a rather ordinary American — a journalist, how ordinary can you get? — whose beliefs in the ideals upon which this nation was founded led him into what others now would call heroism.

The source of the title of Sauvage’s upcoming homage to the man and his deeds, And Crown They Good, tells more about what was really happening than the Hollywood version does.

O beautiful for spacious skies,
For amber waves of grain,
For purple mountain majesties
Above the fruited plain!
America! America!
God shed his grace on thee
And crown thy good with brotherhood
From sea to shining sea!

Brotherhood. Varian Fry saw me — if he ever indeed laid eyes on me — as his brother. He recognized the arts, the ability of expression, as the soul of the human race and risked his life in order to save a key portion of that soul.

Nobody told him to do it. He simply knew it was something that had to be done and stepped forward, just because it was right.
Just because it was the right thing to do. That is, or perhaps has become, one of the rarest forms of heroism in our world. To oppose evil, in any and all forms, in any and all places, for no reason at all is the greatest thing a human being can do.

Varian Fry did this. Out of the billions who have walked the face of the Earth few have. To tell such a story with less that total honesty and accuracy borders on an insult to the man and his memory.

If you want to know more about what he did, read his own book, “Surrender on Demand.” Wait for the documentary to air on PBS. Seek out the several web sites on the Internet that tell this story.

But when this Showtime movie comes up for an award — and it will, because the core of the story is correct and an amazing piece of history — hold your nose.

**Varian Fry in Marseille**
by Pierre Sauvage

Viewed within the context of its times, Fry's mission seems not "merely" an attempt to save some threatened writers, artists, and political figures. It appears in hindsight like a doomed final quest to reverse the very direction in which the world—and not merely the Nazis—was heading.

In the summer of 2000, filmmaker Pierre Sauvage, President of the Chambon Foundation and its Varian Fry Institute, was among scholars from thirty countries invited to participate in London and at Oxford University in the second "Remembering for the Future" conference, which sought to grapple with the legacy of the Holocaust and the meaning of genocide in the modern world. The result including a three-volume collection of original essays. What follows is adapted from one of these essays. The material is at the heart of Pierre Sauvage's upcoming feature documentary, *And Crown Thy Good: Varian Fry in Marseille*.

1. **The Mission**
1. The Mission

In February 1941, in Marseille\(^1\), France, an American wrote to his wife back in New York:

Among the people who have come into my office, or with whom I am in constant correspondence, are not only some of the greatest living authors, painters, sculptors of Europe . . . but also former cabinet ministers and even prime ministers of half a dozen countries. What a strange place Europe is when men like this are reduced to waiting patiently in the anteroom of a young American of no importance whatever.\(^2\)

Varian Fry, the young American, was 32 when he arrived in Marseille early in the morning of Aug. 14, 1940—only two months after France's traumatizing defeat by the Nazis, and a full year and a half before Americans finally allowed themselves to get dragged into the war.

In that summer of 1940, high-level Nazis were talking among themselves about the need for a final solution to the Jewish question, but there is no evidence that anybody was seriously thinking of mass murder. Throughout the coming year, the German policy would remain one of emigration and resettlement.

What was possible when Fry arrived in Europe would, however, no longer be possible by the time Fry left Europe at the end of October 1941. By then, it wouldn’t only be the doors of the U. S. and other Western countries that were largely closed to refugees; the doors of departure from Europe would be shut too, and the Final Solution would be underway.
These are the circumstances in which a New York intellectual led what we know to have been the most determined and successful private American rescue operation during World War II. At a time of tragic American apathy about the refugee crisis in Europe, Varian Fry was assisted locally in his struggle by other singular and similarly non-Jewish Americans: the late Miriam Davenport Ebel, the late Mary Jayne Gold, Charles Fawcett, the late Leon Ball, the late righteous consul Hiram Bingham IV.

Banding together with Jewish and non-Jewish refugees from the Third Reich, as well as early French opponents to Vichy, this tiny group, with erratic assistance from colleagues in New York, may have helped to save as many as 2,000 people: Marc Chagall, Max Ernst, Jacques Lipchitz, Heinrich Mann, Franz Werfel, Alma Mahler Werfel, André Breton, Victor Serge, André Masson, Lion Feuchtwanger, Konrad Heiden, Marcel Duchamp, Hannah Arendt, Max Ophuls, Walter Mehring, Jean Malaquais, Valeriu Marcu, Remedios Varo, Otto Meyerhof... The list—Fry’s list—goes on and on.

“There is a fire sale on brains going on here, and we aren’t taking full advantage of it,” an American official in Lisbon told Fry in August 1940, long before the Holocaust became established as a metaphor. Even if many of the names on Fry’s list have faded into relative obscurity, the list as a whole represents much of the intelligentsia of Europe at that time; the population shifts Fry helped produce would have major ramifications for American culture.

Though Fry was not specifically concerned with saving Jews—and indeed the German and Austrian anti-Nazi émigrés in France then seemed the most vulnerable of all, whether Jewish or not—Fry became in 1996 the first American singled out to be honored as a Righteous Among the Nations by Israel’s Yad Vashem, the Jerusalem memorial to the Holocaust.

Many basic facts about the man and his mission are still unfamiliar even to scholars, while some of what is “known” is in fact erroneous or misleading. Furthermore, there have been no attempts as yet to place the rescue effort in its full historical context.

Filling some of these gaps and drawing on extensive research and over one hundred and fifty interviews conducted for the author’s upcoming feature documentary, And Crown Thy Good: Varian Fry in Marseille, this account of the mission will lead naturally enough to some fundamental questions about what we are to make of it, what still remains unknown, and whether the story is more than a mere footnote, however culturally significant, in the history of the Holocaust.

2. The Calling

As a student at Harvard, Fry had early on expressed his love for the arts by founding with classmate Lincoln Kirstein a lively avant-garde intellectual magazine, The Hound & Horn. In the ’30s, he went on to work for small politically-minded
publications, hanging out in liberal anti-isolationist circles and making friends within the anti-Nazi exile community.

A trip to Germany at that time made a strong impression on him, according to Mary Jayne Gold, who participated in her own distinctive way in the Fry mission. The American heiress would never forget the tense, quiet voice with which her friend had told her in Marseille about the anti-Jewish rioting he had observed in Berlin in 1935.

Fry singled out one episode. In a café on the Kurfürstendamm, in the heart of the city, two Nazi youth had approached a man who was quietly having a beer and who looked as if he might be Jewish. As the man had put out his hand to lift the mug, he had suddenly found that hand nailed to the table by a dagger joyfully and triumphantly wielded by one of the thugs. Though Fry, curiously, never wrote up this particular incident, Mary Jayne Gold thought that the image of the hand pinned to the table had been a factor in Fry’s volunteering to go to France.7

When he first gazed down into Marseille from the top of the railroad station’s majestic staircase, Fry had taken a month’s leave of absence from his work, which then consisted of writing and editing substantial political brochures for the Foreign Policy Association, a job he had thoroughly enjoyed. He was an intellectual through-and-through, yet mere analysis no longer satisfied him. Few intellectuals were to wander further from the ivory towers.

He and a few other Americans had noticed the especially ominous Article 19 in the French armistice agreement with Germany. In that clause, adamantly demanded by the Germans,8 France had ostensibly agreed to “surrender on demand” any citizens of Greater Germany asked for by the German authorities.

Except for its potential victims, few in France, in those stressful times, had attached much significance to Article 19. Leading French historians of that period recall that the clause had, in fact, been aimed at “les fauteurs de trouble”—those few “troublemakers” or agitators whom the Germans could accuse of having been warmongers against Germany.9 Indeed, it appears that very few refugees were, in fact, turned over to the Germans by Vichy as a result of Article 19.10 (Subsequent French complicity in the deportation of Jews from France was not related to the terms of the armistice.)

In New York, however, the apparent threat galvanized those concerned with the plight of the anti-Nazi refugees in France, leading to the creation of an “Emergency Rescue Committee,” an entirely private, shoestring effort launched at a fund-raising luncheon at New York’s Hotel Commodore on June 25, 1940.

In Ingrid Warburg’s apartment overlooking the Museum of Modern Art, lists were frantically put together of people who were deemed to be obviously in danger or who might be in danger soon enough.11 There were many artists and writers on these
lists, but also many names belonging to a small, left-socialist splinter group, Neu Beginnen (New Beginning).

As is often forgotten, the operation at the outset had been to a large extent political. The Jewish Labor Committee had quickly and remarkably succeeded in obtaining from the Department of State several hundred emergency visitors’ visas for prominent political refugees trapped in France. Neu Beginnen’s Karl Frank (who went under the name Paul Hagen) had been concerned that the help then being worked out for these German and Austrian refugees in France was being refused to his somewhat left-wing (albeit anti-Communist) friends.12

Early on, the assistance of Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt was sought, and at that time she gave it. Because of this early help and encouragement to Fry and the E. R. C—perhaps also because of the general admiration for Mrs. Roosevelt—she has sometimes been misleadingly portrayed as virtually spearheading the rescue effort, and Fry sometimes and erroneously characterized virtually as her emissary. But despite her involvement in the summer and fall of 1940, Mrs. Roosevelt soon returned to the “thunderous” silence, as Blanche Wiesen Cook has characterized it, that she had displayed about Nazi persecution in the ’30s.13

On June 27, Fry brought Mrs. Roosevelt up to date:

What is urgently needed now is a new Scarlet Pimpernel who will go to France and risk his life, perhaps many times over, in an attempt to find the intended victims of Hitler’s chopping block, and either provide them with means to keep alive in hiding or, if [this] is possible, to get them out of France before the French authorities reach them. I have volunteered to go myself and shall do so if no more suitable person can be found.14

Did Varian Fry actually risk his life in Marseille, as Hollywood is bound to insist in the dreadful movies we will not be spared?15 Probably not. Neither Vichy nor the Germans were inclined at that time to interfere to that extent with the rights of even the most meddlesome American citizen; an American passport gave most Americans abroad a reasonably justified sense of invulnerability.

Did Varian Fry know that his life was probably not at risk? No, he probably didn’t. Indeed, he had been warned by a French friend in New York that he could easily be made to disappear from some dark street,16 and such disappearances were not rare in any event in Marseille’s crime-infested neighborhoods bordering on murky waters.

3. The Man

France’s bustling port and second city was then the real Casablanca. Many of the Jewish and anti-Nazi refugees who found their way there soon felt, as refugee Hertha Pauli put it, “like rats on a sinking ship.”17 She recalled: “The seas kept rising
all around us; whenever a lifeboat showed on the horizon, everyone wanted to be the first to get in—and then the lifeboat would fade away in the mist.”\textsuperscript{18}

“These refugees,” Fry wrote to his wife, “are being crushed in one of the most gigantic vises in history. Unable to leave France, unable to work, and so earn money, they have been condemned to death—or, at best, to confinement in detention camps, a fate little better than death.”\textsuperscript{19}

His month’s leave over, Fry gave little genuine thought to going home, despite his wife’s increasingly pointed pleas and the growing antagonism from almost all sides. He was not afraid to do whatever the situation required; to break the law under these circumstances appeared to him an obvious moral imperative. The pressures suited him, he lied with aplomb, and he knew that the task on which he had embarked was an important one—a matter of life and death. He sensed that fate would never deal him such a role again. Moreover, when Fry put his heart into a task, as somebody close to him later recalled, he was “amazingly efficient as well as just plain brilliant.”\textsuperscript{20}

Yet Varian Fry had neither the manner, nor the temperament that we associate—perhaps under the influence of entertaining but misleading fiction—with secret agents. He certainly didn’t appear to have any directly relevant experience. A natty dresser, he had a passion for Latin and Greek and bird watching. He could be stuffy and pedantic, but he loved naughty limericks and had an antic, screwball sense of humor. The image we may retain is one of tweeds and bow-ties, but Fry would sometimes receive his staff in his boxer shorts.\textsuperscript{21}

The late literary critic Alfred Kazin was a colleague of Fry’s at The New Republic magazine in 1943 and 1944. What struck him most about Fry in retrospect was the contrast between Fry’s appearance and Fry’s reality, a contrast that may have served him well in Marseille:

He was not only elegant, he was foppish. He had an extraordinary upper class distinction. You couldn’t miss it. Nobody was ever more surprised [than I] to learn what Varian had done in Marseille. It was not the first time, and certainly not the last time in my life—but it was the most decisive time in my life—that I discovered how little one person’s external appearance is a clue to what he really is as such. No one, but no one, who knew Varian Fry as I did—even the very name itself, Varian Fry—would ever have suspected him of being able to do what he did.\textsuperscript{22}

As with many rescuers, if one scratches a little under the surface, one finds formative influences that were early, deep, and stretch back in time. There always seem to be role models.

When his father died in 1958, Fry recalled in a memorial tribute that his grandfather had worked finding foster homes in the Midwest for homeless New York City children.\textsuperscript{23} Though Fry himself, he once wrote, didn’t believe in God,\textsuperscript{24} his father
had grown up “in an atmosphere of practicing Christianity and Christian charity.” His father’s greatest pleasure, Fry said, “had always been in helping others.”

In a frequently astute and moving biography published in the U.S. in 1999 under the inept title “A Quiet American: The Secret War of Varian Fry”—Fry was neither quiet nor secretive—Andy Marino speculated that aspects of Fry’s sexual life and history may have been a major factor in creating in him the sense of being an outsider, leading perhaps to a special sympathy for the plight of other outsiders. Deviancy came naturally to Fry, Marino suggests, and certainly Fry’s activities in Marseille, given the political climate, can be characterized as “deviant.”

Whatever Fry’s sexual nature may have been—and it is hard to decide to what extent speculation about such matters is relevant—the stress that Marino puts on Fry not being an “organization man” seems appropriate. Fry himself thought that his “non-conformist character structure,” which had created problems for him as a youth at Hotchkiss and Harvard, “produced, later, the . . . more useful activity [in Marseille].”

“I’ve always been a non-conformist, I guess,” he wrote to an acquaintance, “though not, exactly, a revolutionary either.”

He was certainly not the sort of man an established organization, given a range of candidates, would have picked for such a mission. As it happens, Fry’s American cohorts in Marseille were also non-conformists. Mary Jayne Gold had escaped the world in which she had been destined to live. Charles Fawcett viewed himself as the “black sheep” of his distinguished family. Miriam Davenport Ebel felt that they could all be characterized, to some extent, as “misfits.”

Organizations—including universities—have a vested interest in downplaying this fact: rescue during the Holocaust was not, for the most part, the work of organizations—and successful rescue even less so. As Magda Trocmé, widow of pastor André Trocmé of the Huguenot haven of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon, put it in the author’s 1989 feature documentary Weapons of the Spirit: “If we’d had an organization, we would have failed.”

4. The Organization

In Marseille, Fry quickly understood that he needed an organization—which grew into two: the official, cover organization, dispensing humanitarian relief work, and the one working illegally behind the scenes, providing rescue.

His operation, begun in his hotel room and his bathroom at the swank Hôtel Splendide, soon moved to tight quarters at 60, rue Grignan, then finally in January to larger facilities at 18, Boulevard Garibaldi. “Everybody felt a lot better, including the refugees,” staffer Marcel Verzeano recalled about the new office. “On rue Grignan, they were interviewed in small dark places. But when they came to Boulevard Garibaldi,
where there was a lot more light, a lot more space, they felt a lot better. We felt a lot better working there.”

A big American flag dominated the scene at the official Centre américain de secours—which could legitimately be translated as American Relief Center, although Fry preferred to refer to it bluntly as the American Rescue Center. Locally, Fry’s group was often referred to simply as the Comité Fry—the Fry Committee.

The word rapidly spread. Some of the long lines outside the American Consulate became long lines outside the American Rescue Center. It was later estimated that some 20,000 refugees in all made contact with the A. R. C.

The situation was briefly promising. Some U. S. “emergency visas” came. Transit visas through Spain and Portugal didn’t pose a problem. Even the ostensible need for French exit visas could be safely ignored. In those early days, Fry and Leon Ball accompanied Franz Werfel and Alma Mahler Werfel, Heinrich and Nelly Mann, and Thomas Mann’s son Golo Mann, to the Spanish frontier; the group was successfully smuggled across, with Fry himself escorting the luggage across the border.

“They were letting us operate without interfering too much,” staffer Verzeano recalled about those early months. (Verzeano, a Rumanian Jewish doctor known then simply as “Maurice,” played an active role in organizing illegal emigration.) Fry assumed that the lax situation with regard to exit visas was due to simple French confusion at that time. But was it not then unofficial French policy to try to get rid of refugees?

Tension soon mounted. The Spanish border was closed, the “danger” visas stopped coming in, and even if you were able to get a visa for a final destination, whether genuine (i.e., the U. S. or Mexico) or more or less bogus (Siam, the Belgian Congo, Panama, China...), there remained a long wait to get the Portuguese transit visa, and an additional wait to get the Spanish transit visa. The greatest frustration arose when the validity of one document ended while you were waiting for one of the other necessary documents—requiring you to start all over again. Of course, under the best of circumstances refugees were faced with the expense of the trip, and the difficulty of booking passage.

With the onset of an unusually harsh winter and increasingly severe food shortages, Fry’s operation mushroomed and changed. Relief work became more and more necessary: one refugee said that what was terrible about the small sums they were given was that you could neither live nor die on them. Emigration became more difficult and more illegal, while legal and illegal activities were increasingly compartmentalized.

There was a flourishing black market in all manner of goods and services—or rather, there was a good black market and a bad one. As refugee Barbara Sauvage
later recalled, you could buy a pack of cigarettes, for instance, for which you were charged a fortune—that was the good black market; on the bad black market there would be straw in those cigarettes.35

Marseille, to put it mildly, had a very active underworld, and among the gangsters were those who would get paid for their services and deliver (notably Charles Vincileoni, who will later be decorated for his work with the Resistance36), and those who merely absconded. (Of Marseille’s colorful milieu, Mary Jayne Gold quipped to Miriam Davenport that “It’s a bit like high society—everybody knows everybody.”)

Thought not always reliable, underworld contacts were useful to the A. R. C. when hiding places had to be found, money changed at black-market rates, documents forged, officials bribed, people smuggled. Maisons de passe (where rooms were rented by the hour), were particularly useful places to lay low, as were Marseille’s many brothels, which were also hospitable for secretive meetings.

5. The Staff

The A. R. C. staff, which had expanded from 3 to 6 in September, was overworked at 15 in December. “Interviewers” saw fifty potential “clients” a day.37

Among the main Frenchmen on the staff were the left socialist Protestant Daniel Bénédite, the key aide at the end, and the liberal Catholic Jean Gemähling, who would go on to become an early and important figure in the French Resistance. Jews from Paris included Lucie Heymann, Paul and Vala Schmierer, Jacques Weisslitz, and Charles Wolff (the latter two, after devoting themselves to the A. R. C. till the very end, did not survive those years).

Foreign refugees also contributed in important ways to the survival of others, before mostly escaping themselves when it became possible or necessary: Albert Hirschman, the key aide at the beginning—forever nicknamed “Beamish” by Fry, who described him privately as “the best of them all”38—Franz von Hildebrand, Lena Fiszmann, Anna Gruss, Heinz-Ernst Oppenheimer, Bedrich Heine, Karel Sternberg, Marcel Verzeano, Justus Rosenberg, Norbert Friedlander, and many others.

Finally, there were those who without formally being part of the Marseille staff were no less essential to the operation. Hans and Lisa Fittko created and ran an astonishingly effective escape route through the Pyrenees.39 Political cartoonist Bil Spira, then known as Bill Freier, became the main forger for the operation. (“You’re Fry, but I’m Freier,” he used to tell his friend, punning on the German word for “free.”) Caught with his paraphernalia and deported to Auschwitz, Spira survived.40

Other Americans recently arrived in Marseille were among the first to join in Fry’s mission. While each was very different from the other, what is most striking now is what they had in common. Fry’s account, in this regard, is not entirely reliable for a
reason that can be easily stated, although it eluded biographer Andy Marino: by modern standards, Fry would be deemed to have been a sexist. In a deplorable lapse, Marino's biography echoes Fry’s account in its condescending treatment of Miriam Davenport and especially of Mary Jayne Gold.

The late Miriam Davenport Ebel was a scholarly, witty art lover, with strong political beliefs, deeply held humanitarian inclinations, and remarkable savvy. In a brief memoir entitled “An Unsentimental Education,” Davenport later recalled her initial visit to the American Consulate in Marseille and her encounter in the early summer with a Consulate official:

Was anyone, I asked, doing anything for anti-Nazi refugees trapped in France? No. Were there any American organizations in Marseilles looking after their needs? No, none. Oddly, the Consulate's walls were decorated with portraits of Washington, Lincoln, and Herbert Hoover. Franklin Roosevelt's picture was nowhere to be seen. On the way out, I noticed a long queue of refugees, most of them speaking German. I also observed the Consulate's doorman being offensively rude to them. A strong odor of xenophobia and anti-Semitism permeated the premises.41

After meeting with Fry shortly after his arrival, Davenport received a note from him urgently asking whether she could type.42 She couldn’t, but she was delighted to join his staff, even briefly being anointed Secretary General of the organization (Fry liked the waspy, ultra-American ring of her last name).

“The book of Ruth was read to me as a fairy tale, when I was a child—when I was a real little girl, four or five years old,” Davenport, a convert to Catholicism, later explained. “And one of the lines in that is more or less, ‘Your people are my people.’ And I felt very strongly that these people were indeed my people. And that I had to do something about it.”43

In Marseille, Davenport had met and become friends with the late Mary Jayne Gold, an heiress from the Midwest whose charitable instincts and political inclinations Miriam found entirely compatible with her own. Gold had been enjoying a high-living expatriate’s life in Paris when France collapsed. “You felt it was the end of the world,” she recalled, “that everything you believed in and everything that had been built up by humanity or decency for centuries was finished. And yet, there was another part of me that said, ‘We’re going to beat ‘em.’”44

Gold had been planning to go home from Marseille, and her reasons for staying on at that time had as much to do with her budding affair with a young French gangster—she rescued him too, and he ultimately became a war hero45—as it did with the rescue effort.46 Fry was initially skeptical of the rich dilettante, but soon drew on her willingness to help financially and to participate in other ways. Most notably, she was asked to go to the repressive French internment camp of Le Vernet and seek permission from the commandant for four highly vulnerable political inmates to come to
Marseille, ostensibly just to claim visas awaiting them; to everybody’s amazement, she was successful.

It was Miriam Davenport who enlisted Gold to subsidize expanding the relief and rescue effort to encompass more than just the luminaries and politicos on Fry’s initial lists, creating what Davenport called at the time “the Gold list,” which Davenport administered and Gold funded. (Years later, Gold asked longtime International Rescue Committee official Karel Sternberg, once himself a refugee in Marseille, who were some of the so-called “unimportant people” her money had gone to help. He smiled, said nothing, and pointed to himself.)

Gold was not the air-headed blonde evoked in “A Quiet American.” After all, she understood what few Americans seemed to understand at that time—and perhaps fewer still in her waspy, prosperous social class: civilization as they knew it was at stake with the rise of Nazism. “She has already given us thousands,” Fry wrote of Gold to his wife in September 1941, “and she is more interested in our work than any one else I know.”

Moreover, Mary Jayne Gold’s flavorful memoir, “Crossroads Marseilles 1940,” edited by Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis for publication by Doubleday in 1980 and published in France in 2001, remains an especially clear-eyed if colorful and idiosyncratic account of Gold’s experiences in 1940-41—a year that she later considered to have been the only one in her life that really mattered. "I was not there to witness the worst," she wrote, "only the beginning, and even then I was sometimes embarrassed into a sort of racialism—like being ashamed of belonging to the human race.”

Throughout his life, Charles Fernley Fawcett—wrestler, Foreign Legionnaire, movie star, socialite, trumpet player, songwriter, composer, artist, expatriate—remained a moral adventurer of sorts, traveling the globe and helping resistance movements in Afghanistan and elsewhere. Independently of his work for Fry, Fawcett also accepted in Marseille to engage in a series of six bigamous and bogus marriages, helping some women to get out of internment camps and allowing all the “wives” to get out of Europe. (At one point, two Mrs. Fawcetts turned up at the same time in Lisbon.)

Fawcett did all sorts of odd jobs for Fry, but will best be remembered as the doorman receptionist at the A. R. C., decked out in an official-looking if indefinable Ambulance Corps uniform, attempting to keep order while steering people to interviewers. His gracious manner was appreciated even though his Southern drawl made his English especially hard to understand for the refugees—and he was even more indecipherable in poor Southern-accented French: “They-ah now, you-all. Step back. Take it easy. Evra-body gets his turn. They-ah now. You'll be next.”

“I guess we were from the Promised Land,” is how Fawcett later remembered his status as an American in Marseille. “We were taught at school, you know, the
strong protect the weak. And this is the way it’s supposed to be—we are our brother’s keeper, let’s face it. And America was the strong nation in those days.”

Fawcett’s friend Leon Ball, an expatriate lard salesman in France, was an important member of the underground team, adept at border crossings. Little is known about him, because he disappeared after an incident that was embarrassing to him; to this day, none of his Marseille friends have the slightest idea what became of him.

Mary Jayne Gold liked being “where the action was,” and the same can certainly be said of the other Americans. More surprisingly, Davenport, Gold and Fawcett all happened to have family trees stretching back seemingly all the way to the Pilgrims. If American rescue in Marseille had a sense of noblesse oblige, the pedigree was authentic. (It should also be noted, however, that many members of the U. S. foreign service at that time, a body not particularly sympathetic to refugees or to Jews, also had competitively long lineages.)

The stress being placed here on Fry’s American friends is not meant to suggest that their roles in Marseille were more important than those of Fry’s European colleagues. This was not the case, as Charles Fawcett is quick to tell you. It is just that the greatest significance of the story of the Fry mission may lie in what there is to learn about the American response to the crisis—what it was, and what it could have been.

In that respect, it is significant that Fry had one ally at the U. S. Consulate in Marseille—and only one: Vice Consul Hiram Bingham IV; inscribing his book for Bingham in 1945, Fry would call him his “comrade-in-arms.” It is unlikely that there were many other members of the American foreign service at that time who saw the situation as “Harry” Bingham put it in a letter to his wife, shortly after the start of World War II: “We can only pray that the natural goodness of men will fight off the plague before it spreads too far.”

6. The Do-gooders

Tracy Strong, Jr. of the Y. M. C. A. and the European Student Relief Fund did important work in the French internment camps (and also provided support to relief work in the Christian oasis of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon.) He later remembered the atmosphere in Marseille:

There was complete confusion. Nothing seemed to work. Trains were packed and didn’t run on time. Very crowded streets—the whole town was just crowded and noisy and dirty. A lot of beggars or semi-beggars, people trying to make a living one way or another. Every office had refugees—whether it was the Quakers or the Y. M. C. A. office or the Consulate office—the waiting rooms were just packed with people waiting to see somebody and get some help of one kind or another, maybe get a visa, maybe find out how to get through Spain to Portugal, or get a boat to North Africa. The French would
have been glad to ship all of [the refugees] anywhere. The Consulate was pretty
neutral—you didn’t feel they were really pushing themselves.57

The growing familiarity of the Fry story has obscured the fact that there were,
of course, other American relief organizations and committees active in Vichy France,
though their priorities were often different. The American Red Cross was best known in
Marseille for its distribution of milk and other needed supplies. (When Miriam
Davenport read in a local newspaper about the arrival in Marseille of Varian Fry, she
surmised to Mary Jayne Gold that he was “just another milkman.”58)

Of course, Jewish organizations such as the local Comité d’Assistance aux Réfugiés (supported by the Joint Distribution Committee) and HICEM, were also on the
scene. Among the major American organizations represented in Vichy France were the
American Friends Service Committee (Dr. Howard and Gertrude Kershner, Rev. A. Burns
Chalmers), the Unitarian Service Committee (Dr. Charles R. Joy, Rev. Waitstill Sharp,
later Noel Field), and the Y. M. C. A. (Donald A. Lowrie, Tracy Strong, Jr.).

While some of these “do-gooders” worked closely with Fry, they mostly
restricted their activities to relief work rather than rescue, and drew the line at doing
anything illegal.59 One whose agenda was similar to Fry’s was Dr. Frank Bohn, who
claimed to represent the American Federation of Labor but who had actually been sent
over primarily by the Jewish Labor Committee, in order to help rescue people on their
lists.60 He blusteringly welcomed Varian Fry to Marseille, but was ineffectual and soon
left after a Department of State telegram laid down the law:

While Department is sympathetic with the plight of refugees and has
authorized consular officers to give immediate and sympathetic consideration to their
applications for visas this government cannot repeat not countenance the activities as
reported of Dr. Bohn and Mr. Fry and other persons in their efforts in evading the laws
of countries with which the United States maintain friendly relations.61

In a memo to the American Embassy in Vichy in May 1941, Marseille Consul
General Hugh S. Fullerton reported on the “under-cover activities of members of certain
relief organizations operating in France,” indicating that the State Department would not
be likely to approve of such activities by such people. “Other considerations aside,” he
added, “they are not fitted for such work.” Referring specifically to Fry’s involvement in
getting British airmen out of France, Fullerton expressed the belief that if Fry stayed on
much longer, “he would find himself in jail.”62

But it was Fry’s desire to publicize the squalid conditions in French internment
camps that finally led to a falling out with most of the other American relief
organizations active in Marseille—who did not want to jeopardize their good relations
with Vichy, despite the regime’s quick and forceful antisemitic measures during that first
year. It was those good relations, after all, that made much of their work possible,
including the slight ameliorating of conditions in the French camps.
The A. R. C. found itself expelled from the Nîmes Committee (chaired by the well-connected Donald Lowrie), which regrouped the major humanitarian organizations then working in Vichy France. Rev. Howard L. Brooks of the Unitarians wrote in 1942 that Fry was “ostracized by other relief workers who secretly admired his work.”

7. The Refugees

Two months after his arrival, Fry provided the following report to his wife:

My work reached a crescendo of activity right after I got back from Lisbon, but it has now slackened off a little, so that I am at least able to breathe. I still begin at 8 in the morning and work until 11 at night, and sometimes until one. I still see dozens of people every day, and am witness to displays of every possible quality of character, from heroic to despicable. I still have poor, driven refugees lurking for me in my hotel in the morning when I go out and in the evening when I come in. I still have from six to 12 phone calls an hour, and get 25 letters a day. Sometimes the refugees walk right into my bedroom without knocking or announcing themselves.

But the pressure is slackening—not because the situation is improving but because more and more of our charges are being reinterned—and I am at long last getting an occasional chance to breathe. It is horrible to be glad that anybody has been arrested; but I had reached a point in nervous exhaustion a few weeks ago where I actually was glad to have a few of the most insistent and most pestiferous “clients” carried shrieking off.

Despite his moments of weariness, Fry felt some real affinity to the complicated refugees of the European intelligentsia. But it would probably be naïve to think that the intellectual émigrés in France—a remarkable crowd of people that would have been remarkable even without the vicissitudes of history—whole-heartedly embraced Varian Fry as one of their own. “We were slightly contemptuous of American innocents,” Albert Hirschman admitted, “people who did not really understand Europeans. But I think that on the whole it was a good thing that [Varian] played this ‘innocent abroad’ so thoroughly.”

Lisa Fittko described with amazement Fry’s extraordinary faux-pas when he assumed that perhaps her husband and she, committed political types, were hesitating about the mission that he was asking them to undertake out of a desire to pry some money out of him. “How much?” she remembers him saying.

The Fittkos didn’t speak much English, but they understood that question. It brought Hans Fittko to a boil. “He said, ‘Do you think we’re crazy to risk our lives at the border for money?’ He said something like, ‘Do you know what anti-fascists are? Do you know what we’re about?’”
Fry himself would later make lists of the numerous mistakes he felt he had made in Marseille.

Compounding the challenge to Fry was his realization that his job was “like a doctor’s during an earthquake”\(^67\): one must never forget to reassure. “See you in New York,” Fry would say to refugees about to attempt an escape over the Fittko route.\(^68\)

Nor was escape experienced by the refugees in heroic terms, à la Paul Henreid in Casablanca, leaving only to continue the fight. (In real life, Henreid’s Victor Laszlo would probably have found his way to a park bench on Broadway and 72\(^{nd}\) Street). What was on Albert Hirschman’s mind when he fled in late 1940, as he later recalled, was that his goal since 1933 had been to win out over the forces he had been fighting for seven years. “And the only success I had was the fact of escaping—not one time but three or four times. I had the feeling that I had expended a great deal of energy but in the end without success. I did not feel like a hero at all. A hero has to win.”\(^69\)

Deciding not to go off to New York from Lisbon, writer Joseph Kessel put it this way to Fry: "I have seen too much of refugees already to want to become one of them."\(^70\)

Their fears, their need to adjust to an almost incomprehensibly different and challenging situation, did not bring out the best in many of the refugees. In her brilliant memoir, “Escape Through the Pyrenees,” Lisa Fittko underscored how difficult some of the refugees found it to be inconspicuous. The greater the intellect, it sometimes seemed, the greater the difficulty adjusting.\(^71\) While some refugees found it difficult to admit to themselves their vulnerable status, others besieged Fry. Daniel Bénédite warned against giving in to a system whereby refugees were given what they asked for, whether money or attention, because they resorted to hysteria or blackmail or repeatedly came back.\(^72\)

Conductor Diego Masson candidly recalled that his father, artist André Masson, a well-known anti-fascist married to a Jew, would get very drunk in the evening when he couldn’t work, and would speak out loudly and provocatively at French cafés. “He never could keep his mouth shut even when he wasn’t drunk. I’m quite sure that without Varian Fry, my father would have been arrested, and my mother and my brother and me would have been put in concentration camps, as Jews. With a father like mine, we would not have survived.”\(^73\)

The most famous tragedy of that time involved the prominent German Social Democratic leaders Rudolf Breitscheid and Rudolf Hilferding, who by all accounts haughtily refused to do anything illegal—they weren’t going to stoop to Hitler’s level. Convinced that the French government would protect them, they were turned over to German authorities and did not survive.
Charles Fawcett, a man disinclined to say anything derogatory about anybody, least of all a refugee, conceded that “There were maybe a few that we didn’t fall in love with—a few. They wouldn’t listen to you. They thought, ‘We were so famous, nobody will do anything to us.’ Some of them said that! ‘The French wouldn’t dare to do anything to us—there’s world opinion.’ World opinion—can you imagine that? Let me tell you, world opinion wasn’t standing behind them much in those days.”

Writing later in diary form, in a subsequently scrapped draft of his memoirs of that time, Fry recalled the new wave of panic that set in among the refugees with the news of the arrest of Breitscheid and Hilferding. “The office has been the scene of indescribable hysteria all day; one man actually got down on his knees and with tears streaming down his face begged me to save his life.” The supplicant, prominent anti-Nazi lawyer Alfred Apfel, later died of a heart attack in the A. R. C office, with Fry holding him.

“If almost everybody wants to be put into hiding,” Fry recounted. “Even artists and writers who have never had any political activity in their lives are terrified. The difficulty is to know who is in imminent danger and who is not. We can’t hide everybody.”

8. The Landscape

Fry worked hard but took breaks. He found the time to write a considerable number of extraordinary letters about his life in Marseille, and his own evolution during that time. Some of these letters are surprising. In one of his more depressed moods—Fry’s second wife, Annette Riley Fry, concluded that he was manic-depressive—Fry went so far as to suggest that maybe “the best thing is an early German victory”; he claimed he meant the statement “quite seriously.”

But he passionately loved virtually all things French—certainly the wine—and even the increasingly difficult times that year didn’t make a dent in his enthusiasm. He loved going on bicycle trips through Provence with his friend Stéphane Hessel, who remembered how methodically he would explore churches and Roman ruins.

In October, Mary Jayne Gold, Miriam Davenport, Theo Bénédite (Daniel Bénédite’s English wife) and Jean Gemahling stumbled on a large villa on the outskirts of Marseille. It soon came to house Fry, Gold and other A. R. C. staffers, as well as such luminaries as writers André Breton and Victor Serge and their families. Baptized “Château Espère-Visa” (Chateau Hoping-for-Visa) by Serge, villa Air-Bel became a famous haunt for the refugee Surrealist artists who congregated around Breton. Fry, who enjoyed horticulture, took a particular delight in the garden. Not the least of the house’s amenities was that it didn’t have a phone.

Fry’s life had become a study in contrasts. He wrote:
I am waiting for Harry Bingham to come with his car. We are going to drive out to Gordes to spend the weekend with the Chagalls. Now that spring is here, Provence is beautiful beyond belief. The almond trees are in bloom, a delicate pink against the soft gray-green and sage-green and dark cypress-green of the Provençal landscape. In this, of all places, it is hard to believe that men, given the beautiful world to live in, can sully and destroy it by war. And yet they do. The same spring which is bringing almond blossoms to Provence is bringing fear and terror to millions of human beings who live not so far away, and to some who live right here. For who knows what spring will bring, but who does not know that it will bring new horrors, perhaps even worse than those of last spring? I hear the sound of tires on the gravel. Harry has come.81

9. The New Yorkers

As good as Fry’s relations mostly were with the staff and the refugees, it is difficult to overstate how bad his relations were from the beginning with American officials in Marseille—and how quickly and precipitously they declined with the Emergency Rescue Committee that had sent him to France in the first place.

His frustration with his New York colleagues was boundless. To his wife, he railed against “those boobs in New York.”82 “Viewed from here,” he wrote later, “they seem like a bunch of blithering, slobbering idiots.”83 For all their sporadic goodwill, as far as Fry was concerned they just didn’t get it.

Eileen Fry tried to calm Fry down: “You really are making a great mistake in being so full of complaints in your letter to E. R. C. They are as good as they can be, which everyone knows is pretty poor.”84 She had praise, however, for Ingrid Warburg and fund-raiser Harold Oram. “They are absolutely on your side, absolutely honest, hard-working, and devoted to the same ends as you are. . . . And do remember that in the long run their particular outfit is all you can really count on, at this end at any rate.”85

But Fry soon found himself proclaiming that the American Rescue Center was an organization that answered to no one except its “clients”: “This office is not your office: it is an independent committee consisting of various American citizens residing in France,” he wrote to the E. R. C. “Please never, even by implication, suggest that I am your representative.”86 Fry preferred to play up his connections with New York’s Museum of Modern Art, the New School for Social Research, the New World Resettlement Fund and other organizations.87

Compounding the breach, the Emergency Rescue Committee put pressure on Fry to deliver the big names. “Casals is probably worth one hundred thousand,” Oram wrote. “Picasso—fifty thousand. Your trio [Heinrich Mann, Franz Werfel, Lion Feuchtwanger] brought in thirty five thousand. Since their arrival we have had nothing good to offer to the public and they are pretty shopworn by this time.”88
And if some really big names elude Fry—Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, Pablo Casals, André Gide, André Malraux are among those who have no wish to go to the United States—he does deliver. “YOUR LETTER MARCH TWENTYFOURTH BRETONS MASSONS EN ROUTE MARTINIQUER,” Fry cabled to the Museum of Modern Art. “ERNST CHAGALLS LEAVING INCESSANTLY ARPS SOON AS GET EXIT VISAS KANDINSKY NOT TILL AUGUST STOP WILL TRY TO HELP LEONOR FINI.” (Fry never was able to provide Arp, Kandinsky, and Fini to his American backers.)

Emergency Rescue Committee Chairman Dr. Frank Kingdon became particularly frustrated with Fry. When Eileen Fry tried to help get her husband’s passport renewed, she was able to talk to Mrs. Roosevelt twice on the phone, and with her help thought she was even making headway with the unsympathetic Assistant Secretary of State Breckinridge Long. But Kingdon “would not back up my request,” Mrs. Fry reported to her husband, “and refused to see me.”

The breach that developed with the E. R. C. would never heal. Only a few weeks after Fry’s return to the U. S., Kingdon, after a trip to Washington, would tell Fry “that he had been reluctantly forced to conclude that the State Department would grant no visas to applicants presented by the Emergency Rescue Committee as long as [Fry] was connected with it.” Fry, “European Director” of the E. R. C., was compelled to resign, and would thereafter find himself advising his refugee friends, in their own interest, not to mention his name.

There had been a clumsy attempt to replace Fry in early 1941, but after Fry went home, nobody would be sent to succeed him. Despite dwindling support from New York, the remaining French A. R. C colleagues would do their best to continue the work, but the financially ailing Emergency Rescue Committee would soon be taken over by another organization, which in turn would become the current and very active International Rescue Committee.

Indeed, when Fry was astutely recommended to the budding Office of Strategic Services ("Mr. Fry is probably the only qualified American expert on the means of moving people around the continent of Europe despite regulations and occupations"), the possibility of Fry being hired for government intelligence work was not increased by E. R. C. Treasurer David Seiferheld, who worked very closely with Kingdon. According to an O. S. S. report, Seiferheld had the following to say about his onetime colleague:

Varian Fry is an intelligent but highly unstable man. He is uncontrollable even with a supervisor on the spot. He has an infinite capacity for intrigue but not very successful intrigue. He managed to irritate American officials to an extraordinary extent. . . . Despite these handicaps he did a fairly good job, that is he managed to get a considerable number of people out and he managed to hold on to his job and retain his cover intact longer than [the E. R. C.] expected, but in doing so he made a good deal of trouble.
But despite the displeasure of the E. R. C. and even when he had to go on without the safety net of an American passport, Fry dug his heels in. “This job is like death—irreversible,” he wrote to his wife, as the marriage crumbled visibly in the correspondence exchanged between them (“Much love, if you’re interested,” Eileen Fry signed one of her letters”).

“We have started something here we can’t stop.” Fry went on. “We have allowed hundreds of people to become dependent on us. We can’t now say we’re bored and are going home.” On another occasion, he cabled: “Could no more abandon my people here than could my own children. Leaving now would be criminally irresponsible.” At that time, Fry had no children.

10. The Officials

Vichy took its time getting rid of him. Fry would never forget Marseille police chief Maurice Rodellec du Porzic’s reproach when the latter told Fry that he was being expelled: “d’avoir trop protégé les juifs et les antinazis”—that he had provided too much protection to the Jews and the anti-Nazis. That word “trop”—too much—suggests that exasperation as well as political retaliation may have motivated the expulsion.

Though Vichy probably knew exactly what the Fry Committee had been doing all along, including the illegal activities engaged in, police officials seemed above all to be obsessively troubled by the presence of Trotskyites or former Trotskyites in Fry’s entourage. After Fry’s arrest, A. R. C. staffer Lucie Heymann was able to meet with the highest Vichy official for the area. She reported that the official “speculated about Mr. Fry’s being either insane, a saint, or an anti-Nazi ‘Bolshevik’ agent.” The feisty Heymann responded “that [Fry] was probably a saint, probably insane, but definitely not a ‘Bolshevik’ agent of anti-Nazism.”

Astonishingly, Fry was not even precisely expelled; he was refoulé—which was a milder form of expulsion that did not preclude his asking for a visa to come back.

What is certain is that by the end of his year in Marseille, everybody—except his A. R. C. colleagues and the refugees!—had wanted him to go home: the State Department, its patience entirely dissipated; the Emergency Rescue Committee; Vichy—and maybe above all the U. S. officials at the American consulate in Marseille.

Even Eleanor Roosevelt’s support ebbed. When Fry and Mary Jayne Gold are among those briefly detained by French authorities in December 1940, Mrs. Roosevelt awkwardly writes on his behalf to Undersecretary of State Sumner Welles: “I’m sure that though he was helping refugees, [Fry] did nothing actually reprehensible.” At a crucial juncture later on, Mrs. Roosevelt reported back to Mrs. Fry that “there is nothing I can do for your husband.” “I think he will have to come home,” Mrs. Roosevelt advises, “because he has done things which the government does not feel it can stand behind.”
Despite what should have been natural affinities of social class, prep school education, wasp and possibly antisemitic backgrounds, Fry immediately rubbed the local American officials the wrong way and it only got worse. Fry’s writings are full of disparaging remarks about those officials, and it is unlikely that in France he kept his feelings to himself. American representatives in Marseille and Vichy early on pegged him as a trouble-maker, and some of them soon came to loathe him.

According to Marseille police chief Rodellec du Porzic, with whom U. S. Consul General Fullerton developed good relations, it was as early as December 1940 that Fullerton had asked the police official “de me débarrasser de [Fry]”—to get rid of [Fry]. A few weeks later, a Vichy document indicates that the U. S. Embassy was conveying to the French that it had “decidedly unfavorable information as to [Fry’s] morality and his activities.” For the rest of his stay in France, the American campaign against Varian Fry would never subside.

When after Fry’s return to the U. S., the Department of State ordered that a French receptionist at the Consulate be fired as politically suspect, the Consul General wrote to the American Embassy in Vichy to convey his conviction that the dismissal of the employee had been Fry’s handiwork. Fullerton did not acknowledge that his furious memo, which he seems to have typed himself, may have had something to do with the fact that the pretty receptionist in question was his mistress. He ended his “Strictly Confidential” note to First Secretary H. Freeman Matthews as follows:

In conclusion, dear friend, I think my previous intention to carry with me to Washington a considerable dossier of “Fryana” should not be shaken[,] as if the snake is attacking minor employees on the Marseille staff he is doubtless saying things far from nice about me, Doug, Woodie and even your august self. I sometimes wonder if it was, after all, wise of me to restrain the Intendant of Police at Marseille from execution of his original intention to put Varian behind the bars.

One can speculate as to who, of the Vichy police chief or the American consul general, had really wanted Varian Fry behind bars the most. After the war, settled in a job running the American Hospital in Paris, Fullerton would claim to Charles Fawcett that when it came to the Consulate’s frosty relations with the A. R. C., he had merely been “following orders.” If so, those orders appear to have been followed with enthusiasm.

Further research is required to determine whether it was, in fact, American officials in Washington or in Marseille who did the most to undermine Fry’s mission. At the time, Fry attributed his “final defeat” in large part to “the craven heart of a consul general.”

It is, in any event, an ironic touch that the little square outside the current location of the U. S. Consulate in Marseille was in 2000 renamed in Varian Fry’s honor. Consul General Fullerton’s successors now receive their mail at 1, place Varian-Fry.
11. The Enemies

It is also not clear whether opposition to opening the doors of America to refugees wasn’t at times even more insidious and effective in Marseille and other American consulates than it was in Washington. In this regard, though the name William L. Peck has not yet entered the history books, perhaps a place should be found for him or at least for his memo of March 6, 1941, on immigration policy at the Marseille consulate. (Consul Peck had then taken over the Visa Section from Hiram Bingham IV, who was shunted by the State Department to less sensitive posts and soon gave up on a life in the foreign service.)114

In his memo, Peck sought to establish his goodwill by stressing at the outset that he did not “subscribe to the school of thought which advocates refusing visas to all persons whose faces we do not like, on some flimsy pretext or by invoking the technicalities of immigration law to extreme limits.”

Although Peck deplored “as much as anyone the influx into the United States of certain refugee elements” and protested the notion apparently held in some other American consulates that the Marseille office was “more lenient” than any other in granting visas, he was “convinced . . . that the Department does desire that visas be issued, when quota numbers are available, to persons legally qualified for admission to the United States.”

Peck also wished to stress his soft spot for old people:

These are the real sufferers and the ones who are dying off. The young ones may be suffering, but the history of their race shows that suffering does not kill many of them. Furthermore, the old people will not reproduce and can do our country no harm, provided there is adequate evidence of [financial] support.115

The memo is not just buried in Consul General Fullerton's files. On April 11, 1941, shortly before going off to Lisbon for the rest of the month—leaving Peck in charge at the consulate116—Fullerton sent the memo on to the Secretary of State and to others:

As of possible interest to the Visa Office I am attaching a memorandum prepared by Consul William L. Peck, in charge of our Immigration Section in Marseille over a considerable period, reflecting in a general way the attitude which we have assumed toward immigration at this particular time. I may add that copies of this memorandum have been sent to the consular officers at Lyon and Nice for their information.117

It was during that same month that Fry received from New York a copy of an article in the New York Post outlining the obstructionist policies being carried out by the American consulate in Marseille. He sent it on to Peck, with the following comment: “I
thought you’d be amused.” Peck scribbled a few words next to Fry’s: “I am not amused.”

In June 1941, Fry made a note to himself about what may have been a conversation with Consul General Fullerton (the word “General” is written but crossed out, as if not to identify the speaker too precisely): “The [Consul] was giving me advice. ‘Why do you have so many Jews on your staff?’ he asked. I told him I didn't have as many as the police accused me of having. Less than half the staff was Jewish. 'Well,' the Consul said, 'I think you make a mistake to have so many. The Department withdrew all the Jews on the Embassy and Consular staffs in France shortly after Pétain came to power. I think there's only one left, a clerk at the Embassy.”

In August 1941, just before Fry’s expulsion, Fullerton passed on some documents to the American Embassy in Vichy, with the following cover note: “I am enclosing some ‘fryana’ which somebody up there may care to read and which were left with me the other day.” The documents consisted largely of A.R.C. reports, many of them meticulously prepared by Daniel Bénédite, detailing conditions in the French internment camps.

The biggest enemies of Fry’s mission to France were not French officials; they may not have been really all that unhappy with what he was doing. Nor were they German officials, who only cared at that point to get their hands on certain definable opponents of the Reich, and perhaps not all that many of them. The biggest enemies of the rescue effort were Americans.

12. The Stakes

What gives the Fry mission its greatest significance is not just that it highlights the conflicting American refugee—and “Jewish”—policy at that time, but also that it was during that very time, in 1941, that the Nazis decided on what has to be characterized as a major change in policy, a change glaringly obvious to most scholars and yet dimly perceived by most Americans.

Even major historians stumble into anachronistic lapses with regard to this Nazi change in attitudes. In her Pulitzer Prize-winning book, “No Ordinary Time: Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt: The Home Front in World War II,” Doris Kearns Goodwin writes of the summer of 1940: “It was the summer of high hopes. As long as America and other countries were willing to open their doors to the Jews, the Nazis, at this juncture, were still willing to let them go.”

But the Nazis were not merely “willing” to let the Jews go at that time—they were eager.

For all of Hitler’s dire “prophecies” and whatever his murderous fantasies and genocidal longings, it took time, war, and specific circumstances for the Nazis to begin
to imagine—let alone begin to implement—something on the grand scale of the Final Solution as we have come to know it.

Until then, German policy had long been one of “solving the Jewish question by means of emigration or evacuation,” as historian Michael R. Marrus has summarized it. The old plan of resettling Jews in Madagascar and letting them fester or die off there—should that be what happens—had not been entirely shelved; it was gradually abandoned only when it became clear that continued British sea power made access to the island impossible. Other territorial solutions were also seriously considered.

The objective always was to get the Jews out of the Third Reich and out of Europe—one way or the other. The hope undoubtedly was for world domination and the total elimination of the Jews, but hope and fantasies are just that—policies are what people do, and policies, ultimately, are what count. “Nazi policy changed course,” historian Saul Friedländer has stated clearly, “when it replaced emigration/expulsion with extermination.”

It was in October 1941 that Jewish emigration from Germany and German-held lands was banned, and mass deportations of German Jews to the East began. For historian Yehuda Bauer, “The decision-making process in Germany probably culminated in the late summer or early fall of 1941 in the consensus that all Soviet Jews should be murdered, and then immediately afterwards into a consensus that all European Jews should be murdered.”

Historian Philippe Burrin made the case, endorsed in 1994 by Friedländer, that there was a specific decision made by Hitler in mid-September 1941. Burrin argued that even the escalating and violent slaughter of Jews in conquered Russian territories after the German invasion of the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941, did not necessarily constitute a reversal of the overall plan to resettle Europe’s Jews after the war.

Historians Christopher R. Browning and Richard Breitman continue to believe that the decision was made earlier in the summer, and Breitman has outlined evidence that seeks to tighten “the intrinsic connection between the mass shootings of Jews in the Soviet territories and the assembly-line gassings of European Jews in the extermination camps,” which began at Chelmno in December 1941. (Breitman has also detailed how British interception of German radio communications allowed British authorities to know immediately the extent of the massacres—and how British officials chose to keep this information to themselves, not even disclosing it for the Nuremberg trials)

But the precise date of the decision is surely less important than its essential meaning, which Friedländer has put this way: “Since there was nowhere for them to be sent, the Jews would vanish by the only remaining route: death.”
One year earlier, in October 1940, some 6,500 German Jews had been loaded onto trains and deported to the West, bringing them into Vichy France, to the consternation of the French authorities, who first protested to the Germans, then begged the United States to help out by taking in a fair share of these refugees. “Put bluntly,” Michael Marrus and Robert O. Paxton write in “Vichy France and the Jews,” “the Germans wanted to dump Jews in the Unoccupied Zone; Vichy wanted to keep them out.”

Undersecretary of State Sumner Welles prepared a response to the French Ambassador’s plea for help, and submitted it to Roosevelt for the President’s approval. The response basically told the collaborationist French regime, with which we had good relations, to get lost, that the U. S. couldn’t do anything more than it was doing.

And Welles explained to the President, who approved the response, that if the U. S. gave in to the French on this they would never hear the end of it. The Germans would, in effect, be in a position to keep shoving the poor refugees down American throats.

Information reaching us is conclusive that if we or the other American Republics yield to these blackmailing totalitarian tactics, the Germans will inaugurate something approaching a “reign of terror” against the Jewish people, not only those remaining in Germany but those as well in countries under occupation or which may be occupied in the future. Thus hundreds of thousands of unhappy people will be dispossessed of their homes and their goods to be used as pawns in a German maneuver calculated to embroil opinion in the democratic countries overseas.

The greatest fear in high-level American circles was not that Jews wouldn’t be able to escape Hitler’s Europe; it was that the U. S. might find itself pressured to take in large numbers of these refugees. Moreover, such an influx, it was assumed, would inevitably exacerbate the already startlingly high—and growing—levels of antisemitism in the U. S.

The extent and depth of antisemitic and pro-Nazi sentiment in the United States in the late ’30s and early ’40s has not yet been fully chronicled and is certainly unfamiliar to most Americans today. The war effort and the flag-waving patriotic hoopla in the American media of the time have obscured the powerful, dark forces that had permeated American life.

In the late ’30s, Nazi military attaché in Washington Ulrich von Gienanth encouraged one American fascist leader—there were many aspiring Hitlers around—with the opinion that there was ten times more anti-Jewish feeling in the U.S. then than there had been in Germany before Hitler’s rise to power.

According to a Roper poll conducted in July 1939 and not released at the time, 53% of Americans believed that Jews were different—and should be restricted. Ten
percent of the public openly declared to the pollster that they favored expelling Jews from the U. S. Historian David S. Wyman analyzed surveys from the late ‘30s and early ‘40s and noted that approximately a third of the American public was in favor of, or at least sympathetic to, “a general anti-Semitic campaign” (roughly another third was ready to actively oppose such an undertaking, while the rest, presumably, were “indifferent”). In April 1939, the very mainstream Fortune magazine reported widespread American opposition to taking in German Jewish refugees—83% of respondents were then opposed to letting in more European refugees—and asked whether Hitler and his American allies wouldn’t be safe in the “joyful conclusion...that Americans don’t like the Jews much better than do the Nazis?”

Indeed, all the public opinion polls would chart a continuing rise in American anti-Jewish feelings throughout the war years, and regardless of the news from Europe and the increasingly obvious plight of the Jews there.

As for the reaction of American Jews to the growing Jewish crisis in Europe, Eleanor Roosevelt—whose passion for civil rights blazed through those years even when her concern for the oppressed European Jews did not—puzzled over it in the fall of 1941. According to a friend, the daughter of American Jewish Congress President Rabbi Stephen Wise, the First Lady confided the following to her during an overnight stay at the White House:

One of the things that troubles me is that when people are in trouble, whether it’s the dust bowl or the miners—whoever it is, and I see the need for help, the first people who come forward and try to offer help are the Jews. Now in these terrible days, when they need help, why don’t they come? Or when they come, why do they speak in a lower fashion?

Whatever the reasons, until late 1941 “The door is bolted on the Allies’ side, not on the Germans’ side,” Christopher Browning stresses. “The Germans were smuggling more Jews out than all the rescue groups. Certainly, when you’re talking about the refugees in the Vichy zone, if the Allies had been willing to take these people, there’s no reason why the vast bulk of them couldn’t have been rescued. But the Allies were trying to resist what they considered Hitler’s totally hostile attempt to flood them with refugees.”

Yehuda Bauer has underscored that while the Nazis had long “thought that the West might be willing to buy [the Jews],” the Allies, for their part, “were convinced that one could not negotiate with the Nazis or bribe them.” “The Allies,” Bauer asserts, “never understood the Nazis, not even when they defeated them.”

If Adolf Hitler and his pathological hatred were necessary for the Final Solution to occur, as most historians agree, he nevertheless could not have imposed such extreme measures against the will of his people. Who is to say that he could have imposed them against the will of the rest of the world?
Elie Wiesel was once asked what was the most important thing the world had learned from the Holocaust. His answer: that you can get away with it. If that is so, then must we not ask how we let them get away it with it?

To be sure, there may be little evidence that Hitler and the Nazis could be swayed by world opinion, since world opinion seldom opposed them very strongly. Yet Konrad Heiden, the writer and Hitler biographer high on the Nazi “most wanted” list—who happily was also on Fry’s list—had in 1938 summarized the risks of such indifference: “The lesson is pure and simple. Whenever the world rises against the Jewish persecution in Germany, those persecutions slacken. Whenever the attention of the world wanders, they are resumed.”

In assessments of the Allied response to the Holocaust, the issue often gets reduced to whether mass rescue was possible once mass murder had begun. But rescuing the potential victim of a murderer once the crime is being committed is one thing; it is quite another to have contributed to the climate that nurtured the potential murderer and indeed allowed him to become one.

Referring to Germany, Philippe Burrin has suggested that “widespread moral indifference” was perhaps “the most effective facilitator of the Final Solution.” Did the moral indifference outside of Germany not ease the way as well?

Despite the specific obsessions and circumstances that may have led Hitler to his fateful decision, is it not legitimate to ask whether the Nazis weren’t influenced in their thinking by the realization that the U. S. and the Western World didn’t want these Jews either and certainly wouldn’t negotiate on their behalf—that in fact the Western world probably wouldn’t care all that much?

Trained to resist speculation, historians will be uncomfortable with such highly speculative questions. But is it not, in fact, speculative to dismiss out of hand the possibility that different attitudes outside of Germany—even just in the United States—could have changed the course of history?

What if America, from 1933 to 1941, had been a nation of Varian Frys, Miriam Davenports, Mary Jayne Golds, Charles Fawcetts, and Harry Bingham? And was the American consular corps with which they tangled in Marseille not in the front ranks of the moral indifference chronicled in historian David Wyman’s landmark study “The Abandonment of the Jews: America and the Holocaust.”

Varian Fry, of course, could not know in 1941 what was happening behind the scenes and how the world was changing, although he may have retained in the back of his mind what fellow Harvard graduate and Nazi propagandist Ernst “Putzi” Hanfstaengl had told him in Berlin in 1935: “that the ‘radicals’ among the Nazi Party leaders intended to ‘solve’ the ‘Jewish problem’ by the physical extermination of the Jews.” (Fry had only “half believed him.”)
When Wyman, then a young graduate student, embarked in the '60s on the first scholarly study of the American response to the Holocaust, he sought Fry’s help. Fry wrote to Wyman that “The subject of your doctoral dissertation interests me very much indeed,” and invited Wyman over to his house in Connecticut. The two men pored over the contents of some cartons Fry had brought down from his attic.

With Wyman’s pioneering research, it seemed that Fry’s time had finally come, but he died before “Paper Walls: America and the Refugee Crisis, 1938-1941” was published. We will never know to what extent Fry would have approved Wyman’s challenging closing words:

One may level the finger of accusation at Franklin Roosevelt for having done so little and at Congress for having done nothing. But the accuser will find himself simultaneously pointing at the society which gave American refugee policy its fundamental shape. Like the President, the majority of Americans condemned Nazi persecution. But most opposed widening the gates for Europe’s oppressed. Viewed within the context of its times, United States refugee policy from 1938 to the end of 1941 was essentially what the American people wanted.

Viewed within the context of its times, Fry’s mission seems not “merely” an attempt to save some threatened writers, artists, and political figures. It appears in hindsight like a doomed final quest to reverse the very direction in which the world—and not merely the Nazis—was heading.

13. The Questions

But the obvious question arises: can one justify the fact that Varian Fry’s initial motivation was—and primary thrust remained—to assist and save select figures of the artistic and political worlds? If it is true that the mission wound up encompassing quite a few anonymous refugees, does the charge of elitism nevertheless carry some weight? For that matter, is a mediocre artist any less entitled to life than a great one?

Indeed, if there are some whom the Fry group simply was not able to get out of France, despite its efforts, there were many others whose candidacy for help was rejected, while they were given meal tickets and sent over to the Quakers: they were just not deemed to be within the purview of Fry’s operation.

Among those who unsuccessfully sought Fry’s help were the “authors” of the author of these lines, the young journalist Léo Sauvage, a Jewish intellectual without American connections, who had found refuge in Marseille with his wife, a Polish Jew who ultimately lost much of her family to the death camps. Fry colleague Jean Gemähling remembered encountering Léo Sauvage at the American Rescue Center. A list of A. R. C. “clients” reveals that the Sauvages had gone so far as to include their real names long successfully buried behind French identities: Sauvage-Smotriez, Leo; Sauvage-Suchowolska, Barbara.
Not able to leave France, Sauvage threw himself into Marseille’s lively intellectual life at that time, founding a theatrical troupe that staged French medieval farces. Later, he and his pregnant wife found shelter in a singular haven of refuge in the mountains of south-central France, Le Chambon-sur-Lignon. There the determined policy was to turn no one away.153

Was the selectiveness of Fry’s effort immoral or at least distasteful? Are we wrong to be mesmerized by the fact that Fry and his friends contributed to the survival of so many “stars” of twentieth-century culture?

Karel Sternberg, a Czech refugee who worked at the American Rescue Center, provided, with some exasperation, what may be the most important answer:

In any operation you do what you can. You don’t measure an assignment by what you cannot do. You measure it by what you can do. That you cannot help 50,000 people doesn’t mean that you cannot help 2,000 people. Let me repeat, you judge the importance and the meaning of an assignment by what you can do, not by what you cannot do. Because it’s always limited, what you can do.154

It is also true that a number of the prominent figures in whom Fry and the Emergency Rescue Committee took a special interest were particularly vulnerable because of their celebrity status—a major advantage to get an American visa, no doubt, but one still needed to get out of France without an exit visa.

But finally, it may be no less important to remember that if Fry was committed to “democratic solidarity,”155 he was also somebody who deeply, passionately cherished the arts and culture. Is it not legitimate to begin by saving those whom one loves?

14. The Temperament

After the war, Fry analyzed for his friend Albert Hirschman the components of his own motivation in Marseille:

You say you wonder what the predominant constituent of my temper was during those times—whether enthusiasm, hope, resignation, or outright cynicism. There was a fair measure of cynicism in it, certainly. I entirely agree with you that it is necessary to have a sense of irony if one is to handle human miseries professionally. But there was a good deal of idealism—less and less as time went on—a certain amount of naïveté, but above all, a common orneriness, which I inherit from my Scotch ancestors. It was a tough struggle, and it took all of my tough Scotch character to stick it out.156

Fry would have appreciated that it was the French who have the best, the pithiest—and untranslatable—term for him. He was an emmerdeur—somebody who drives you nuts.
This was indeed a time when it was important not to be accommodating, and a man surfaced in the right place, at that time, who was incapable of disregarding his judgment in order to be accommodating. To use the familiar understatement, he didn’t suffer fools gladly—but he was as sensitive to moral obtuseness as well as intellectual flaccidity. Even when the stakes were low, Fry would refuse to give in, would not compromise in the slightest, would engage in a barrage of relentless letters.

In Marseille in 1940 and 1941, the stakes had been priceless.

15. The Exile

When Fry’s train left for Spain from Cerbère, a dozen members of his team were lined up by the tracks to bid goodbye to their leader, a moment captured in the last of the many photographs Fry took during his European adventure.157 He cried on the train.158 "I was very sad at having to leave you and all my friends," Fry later wrote to the night watchman at the office in Marseille, "more sad, perhaps, than you were to have me go. For I lost all my friends in going, whereas you lost only one."159

In Spain, on his way to exile in America, Fry reflected on his experience for his wife, conveying that he was no longer the same man that he had been when he’d boarded the Dixie Clipper in New York just a year before:

The roots of a plant in a pot too small will eventually burst the pot. Transplant it to a larger pot and it will soon fill it. But if you transplant it to a pot altogether too large, it will “go to root,” as gardeners say, and may even die from the shock. I was transplanted, 13 months ago, to a pot which I more than once had occasion to fear was too large; but I didn’t die; in the end I think I very nearly filled it—not entirely, but nearly. At least I didn’t die from the shock or the sense of my inadequacy.160

In Marseille, after Fry’s departure, faithful Daniel Bénédite, Lucie Heymann, Anna Gruss, Paul Schmierer and their colleagues—with invaluable help from lawyer and future Marseille mayor Gaston Defferre161—kept the American Rescue Center alive, with no more Americans involved locally, and little or no support from the U. S. According to Daniel Bénédite, there was surprising goodwill from new U. S. Consul General Benton. When the latter introduced Bénédite to a young U. S. Embassy attaché named Cassidy, the Embassy official felt comfortable enough to warmly shake Bénédite’s hand with two hands and say, “I was deeply shocked by the Department’s hostility towards your boss, Varian Fry.”162

Vichy finally shuttered the operation in June 1942, and formally closed it down with the German occupation of the southern zone that November. Bénédite, Jean Gemählung, Justus Rosenberg (a young German Jew who had served as an office boy), would be among those who enter the Resistance—where patriots, alas, were not encouraged to concern themselves with the fate of refugees or Jews. Schmierer wrote
to friends in New York: “It’s curious how very much easier it seems to be to organize emigration toward death than emigration toward life.”

Fry wrote a note to himself: “Since, silence. I have tried again and again since to reach my friends in France, to have even one direct word from any one of them. I have tried again and again, but I have always failed. Whether I whisper or whether I shout there is not even an echo to reply; only silence, silence so complete that I can hear my blood ringing in my ears.”

In New York, Fry tried doggedly and unsuccessfully to sensitize American public opinion to the refugee crisis in Europe and then to the “massacre of the Jews”—a cover story in The New Republic in Dec. 1942. The article began as follows:

There are some things so horrible that decent men and women find them impossible to believe, so monstrous that the civilized world recoils incredulous before them. The recent reports of the systematic extermination of the Jews in Nazi Europe are of this order. Letters, reports, cables all fit together and add up to the most appalling picture of mass murder in all human history.

Curiously, Fry, Miriam Davenport and Mary Jayne Gold all went into psychoanalysis during the war years, and Fry considered it one of the great adventures of his life—even greater than Marseille, he wrote to a friend.

Fry’s superb and voluminous correspondence and other writings—which cry out for anthologizing—make it especially sad that when he decided to write and publish “Surrender on Demand,” his memoirs of his Marseille adventure, he himself had to surrender to the merciless and censoring scalpel of his Random House editor. Though the editor may have been right that American public opinion was not inclined to hear the complaints Fry wanted to voice on American refugee policy and his “shame” at being an American citizen in light of that policy, Fry’s original manuscript, which has been roughly reconstituted from the successive and jumbled drafts he left in his papers, was more textured than the slim book that was published at the end of 1945.

Despite some good reviews, “Surrender on Demand” didn’t sell and quickly went out of print. Fry wrote to a top Hollywood agent, asking “whether there wasn’t anything there which could be adopted for the movies,” but nothing came of that either.

The edition published in 1997, thanks to the pioneering efforts of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, wisely included as an afterward the heart-breaking and blunt foreword he had intended for the book. Not mentioned, however, was that in Fry’s papers this text, including the following words, had been preserved in a folder marked, in his hand, “Suppressed Material”: 
If I have any regret at all about the work we did, it is that it was so slight. In all we saved some two thousand human beings. We ought to have saved many times that number. But we did what we could. And when we failed, it was all too often because of the incomprehension of the government of the United States. It was not until 1944 that the President created the War Refugee Board, to do in a big way, and with official backing, what we had tried to do in our little way, against constant official opposition. But then it was too late.170

16. The Memories

Among those who had been left behind in France was the young German Jew Justus Rosenberg, who had been befriended by Miriam Davenport and Mary Jayne Gold, and brought in to the American Rescue Center to help out. Rosenberg survived in the maquis, and found his way to America after the war, becoming a professor. He had lost touch with his Marseille friends, and in those pre-Internet days it wasn’t easy to find people. But in 1952, Rosenberg sent a letter to Miriam Davenport.

If you recall Marseille, France, 1940/41, “Le Centre Américain de Secours” with its assortment of sometimes odd, but also original and lovable characters, Mary Jayne Gold and the escapade of the “Legionnaire” [a reference to Gold’s gangster lover], “then perhaps you might also remember me, a bewildered young chap who went by the nickname of “Gussie” and who acted more or less as a “valet à tout faire.” Despite the confusion, those were very formative days and I have kept of them a very lasting impression; among them you always occupied a very central position, since it was partly thanks to you that I survived in those trying days.171

A week later, Miriam Davenport sent her response, which included her own reflections on that period, untainted by the growing attention being given to the story today or by any desire for self-promotion. After all, nothing, in 1952, could have been more obscure and of less interest to Americans or anybody else than the Fry mission. Rosenberg found the letter in his papers after Miriam Davenport Ebel’s death in 1999 and her burial on a beautiful day in a beautiful cemetery in the corn fields of Riverside, Iowa.

My dear Dr. Rosenberg!

How very formal and improbable it seems to be addressing ‘Gussie’ as a Herr Associate Professor in Dayton, Ohio! . . . It was when I came to ‘Gussie’ that I saw through your reincarnation and simply shrieked with joy!

I remember a great deal about you—you were a symbol of sorts, to me, in those days. Everyone was moving Heaven and earth to save famous men, anti-fascist intellectuals, etc. And there were you, a nice, intelligent youngster with no family, no money, no influence, no hope, no fascinating past. I remember one evening [writer] Hans Sahl tried to tell you how much worse off and in danger he was than you. And I recall
telling Sahl (to his horror!) that he was a helluva lot better off, since many Americans would do everything possible for him, but that you were just another kid, a Jew, ‘nice boy, but there’s nothing we can do’…”

This last quote is what Varian Fry had said to Miriam Davenport when she had tried to press Rosenberg’s case.

It’s strange how that brief period in Marseille looms so large in retrospect. We are “a people apart” somehow. It was a curious nightmare—it seemed awful at the time, but it must have been happy too. We all had a purpose, a highly moral task to perform. And we and our friends had to survive no matter how. We were unencumbered by baggage and freed of all pretense of middle-class respectability. All joy was intense because of imminent danger. Will our wits and vision ever be so sharp again? I wonder.

17. The End

In Marseille, in 1940, Fry had sent his mother one of those hideously colorized postcards of that time, apologizing for it, and explaining that he had bought it from a war veteran with two medals in his lapel who had limped from table to table in a restaurant where Fry was eating with friends. "The indifference with which human beings treat the heroes of yesterday always appalls me" Fry wrote, presumably with no inkling that he himself was to experience that indifference for the rest of his life.

What is true for most rescuers became part of the saga of Varian Fry as well: the rescued did not, for the most part, maintain contact. Few lasting friendships had been established in Marseille with the “clients”; the affinities were circumstantial and did not survive transplantation to the New World. Only the ties with the key aides remained strong.

Fry separated from Eileen shortly after his return to the States, and after her death in 1948, he married Annette Riley in 1950. They would have three children of whom two survive. His politics, always staunchly anti-Communist, became quite conservative. Ultimately leaving behind the world of editing and political writing for which he was suited, resisting till the end the lure of academia, which should have been second nature to him, Fry instead, with varying success, sought to earn a living in unexpected pursuits for such a man, such as television advertising and the promotion of Coca-Cola.

His friend Stanton Catlin thought that in entering the dog-eat-dog world of business in New York, Fry was determined to show his mastery at something new and original, and also felt the need to assert in that manner a conventional manliness. For his Marseille cohort Albert Hirschman, so successful in America, Fry’s postwar years were marked mainly by his desire “not to play second fiddle to himself.” Daniel Bénédicte came to see in him a “fallen idol.”
Fry seems seldom to have brought up his exploits in France in 1940-41, but this great Francophile decided in the ’60s that he wanted and deserved to receive French honors. The matter had dragged on until it had finally been brought to the attention of André Malraux, then Minister of Culture. Malraux remembered visiting the offices of the A. R. C. in 1941, refusing to leave France, but entrusting Fry with the reels of his dangerous film on the Spanish Civil War, as the film itself was then at risk. It was only a few months before his death that Fry and his family attended a ceremony where he received the croix de Chevalier of the French Legion of Honor.

Fry had been divorced from Annette Fry and had just become the Latin teacher at a preppy Connecticut high school when he died on Sept. 12, 1967, at the age of 59, of a cerebral hemorrhage. Shortly before, his old comrade Mary Jayne Gold had sent Varian some cheerful greetings on a postcard. Her last words: “Well, we shared our finest hours, my friend.”

“In some ways I owe him my life,” the sculptor Jacques Lipchitz, who had remained devoted to Fry, wrote to Annette Fry in his condolence letter. “I did not want to go away from France. It was his severe and clairvoyant letters which helped me finally to do so. And of what help he was once I decided to go to America! I mourn with you this marvelous man, lost a little in our difficult world, and I will cherish his memory to the end of my life.”

Flying in from Italy for the memorial service, Lipchitz raised his eyes towards the sky and directly addressed his friend, seeking to express what Fry had represented for “all of us.” At key moments in history, he said, individuals emerge with precisely the qualities required by the situation. In everyday life, Lipchitz added, Fry “was like a race horse hitched to a wagonload of stones.”

Fry himself had for some reason in 1943 attended a church service and torn out and kept in his papers his whole life a quotation from the program. The words were from Ralph Waldo Emerson, and in abridged form they could serve as emblematic for Varian Fry in Marseille: “There are men . . . to whom a crisis . . . comes graceful and beloved as a bride.”178

“Heroes of flesh and blood are complex creatures,” Mary Jayne Gold closed her account of her year in Marseille in 1940-41, “born sometimes to shine brilliantly only for their short and finest hour. Varian Fry went to Marseille to his appointed task and fulfilled his mission, not less glorious because it was brief. Let the record speak.”179

© Chambon Foundation, 2000-2007

Footnotes
Abbreviations used are as follows:
CF  Chambon Foundation
COL Columbia University, Rare Book and Manuscript Library
Crown Interview videotaped for And Crown Thy Good: Varian Fry in Marseille, upcoming feature documentary by Pierre Sauvage (Varian Fry Institute)

1 The spelling “Marseille” will be used throughout, although references to “Marseilles” in cited texts will not be modified.
2 Varian Fry to Eileen Fry, Feb. 3, 1941 (COL).
3 Varian Fry’s approximation in 1944 (Varian Fry, Surrender on Demand, original draft foreword, COL/CF reconstruction). This round number is not likely to be a very precise one, and such estimates are further complicated by the overlap between Fry’s rescue operation and others.
4 Varian Fry, Surrender on Demand, original draft, p. 42 (COL/CF reconstruction). The official is American Minister to Portugal Herbert C. Pell, whom Fry at that time found “very sympathetic about the plight of the refugees.” However, documents cited by David S. Wyman suggest otherwise (David S. Wyman, Paper Walls: America and the Refugee Crisis, 1938–1941 Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 1968], pp. 143–145.
5 The Ohio-born Mildred Theis was previously honored by Yad Vashem as one of the Righteous Among the Nations with her husband Edouard Theis, assistant pastor of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon during the war. She had, however, taken on French citizenship by that time.
6 There is information on the documentary at the Chambon Foundation’s Varian Fry Institute website at www.varianfry.org/crown1_en.htm. Pierre Sauvage can be reached at sauvage@varianfry.org or at Chambon Foundation, 8033 Sunset Boulevard, Los Angeles, CA 90046–2471.
8 Interview with Henri Amouroux (Crown). Also, Henri Amouroux, Pour en finir avec Vichy: 1. Les oublis de la mémoire 1940 (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1997), p. 269. Anita Kassof points out that the German demand, on its face, was not unprecedented. “Singularly disturbing about the extraditions ordered under Article 19, however,” she underscores, “was Vichy’s apparent willingness to surrender refugees whom the Nazis defined as guilty of crimes.” (Anita Kassof, Intent and Interpretation: The German Refugees and Article 19 of the Franco-German Armistice, 1940–41, (M.A. thesis, 1992).

9 Interviews with Henri Amouroux and Jean-Pierre Azéma (Crown). See also Amouroux, Pour en finir avec Vichy: 1. Amouroux points out that the clause was patterned after a similar clause imposed on Germany by the Allies in the Versailles Treaty after World War I. Azéma underscores that the expectation was that a peace agreement would soon follow, and that France’s traditional attachment to the concept of political asylum would then be upheld. It should be noted, however, that Socialist leader André Philip, then visiting the Huguenot village of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon in France, insisted on the iniquity of the clause. (Interview with pastor Edouard Theis in Pierre Sauvage’s 1989 feature documentary Weapons of the Spirit.)
The exact number of refugees handed over to the Germans as a result of Article 19 has yet to be established. Anita Kassof indicates that “Vichy might ultimately have surrendered as few as thirty German nationals to the Reich under its terms in the period between June 1940 and November 1942.” (Anita Kassof, *Intent and Interpretation*, p. 100)

Interview with Ingrid Warburg Spinelli (*Crown*).

Blanche Wiesen Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt, Volume 2, 1933-1938*, (New York: Viking, 1999), p. 312, in a chapter entitled “A Silence Beyond Repair.” If the Fry story is in large measure a story about Americans, the perplexing relationship that the crusading First Lady had with the Emergency Rescue Committee—and indeed with the later massacre of the Jews—is a piece of the puzzle that deserves far greater research and analysis than the shallow and mostly evasive treatment it has received to date. What is one to make of her astounding question to a Zionist in January 1943, at a time when everybody had a sense of what was happening to the Jews of Europe: “Why can’t Jews be members of a religious body but natives of the lands in which they live?” (Letter to Dr. Joseph Dunner, reprinted in his *The Republic of Israel: Its History and Its Promise* [New York, 1950].) In 1952, providing a preface to the publication of *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl* (New York, 1952), all Mrs. Roosevelt saw in the work was “one of the wisest and most moving commentaries on war.” She also felt no need to make any reference to Anne Frank being Jewish.

Varian Fry to Eleanor Roosevelt, June 27, 1940 (COL).

The first dramatic movie based on the Fry mission, the Showtime cable production *Varian’s War*, written and directed by Lionel Chetwynd, was appalling in almost every important respect.

Fry, * Surrender*, original draft, p. ? (COL/CF reconstruction). Also, interview with François and Fanny Charles-Roux (*Crown*).


Ibid.

Varian Fry to Eileen Fry, Sept. 7, 1940 (COL).

Communication to Pierre Sauvage.

Interview with Miriam Davenport Ebel (*Crown*). It should also be noted that Fry is not a Quaker, though he has frequently been identified as such.

Interview with Alfred Kazin (*Crown*).

For information on Charles Fry and the Children’s Aid Society, see Annette R. Fry, *The Orphan Trains* (New York: New Discovery Books, 1994).

Varian Fry to Jean Gemähling, Jan. 9, 1945 (COL).

Varian Fry, *Tribute to the Memory of My Father*, April 11, 1958 (CF photocopy).


Varian Fry to Dean A. C. Hanford, Sept. 7, 1945 (COL).

Varian Fry to Lansing Warren, May 2, 1945 (COL).


Interview with Marcel Verzeano (*Crown*).

E.g., American Rescue Center memo, Jan. 14, 1941 (COL).

Daniel Bénédite, *La filière marseillaise: Un chemin vers la liberté sous l’occupation* (Paris:

33 Interview with Marcel Verzeano (Crown).
35 Barbara Sauvage communication to Pierre Sauvage, date unrecorded.
36 Fry disguised him as “Jacques” in Surrender on Demand.
38 Varian Fry to Eileen Fry, Feb. 9, 1941 (COL). Hirschman’s false name at the time was actually Abel Hermant. Hirschman writes about his work with Fry in A Propensity To Self-Subversion (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard, 1995).
40 Interview with Bil Spira (Crown).
41 Miriam Davenport Ebel, An Unsentimental Education. Ebel’s brief account of her wartime experiences in Europe is posted at the Chambon Foundation’s Varian Fry Institute website at www.varianfry.org/fry_ebel_en.htm.
42 Varian Fry to Miriam Davenport, Aug. 27, 1940 (COL).
43 Interview with Miriam Davenport Ebel (Crown).
44 Interview with Mary Jayne Gold (Crown).
45 Varian Fry had disliked Mary Jayne Gold’s boyfriend, Raymond Couraud, nicknamed “Killer,” who had been a source of problems for Fry. Andy Marino is wrong, however, to cast doubt on whether Couraud really was a deserter from the Foreign Legion and to write that he “fancied himself in London with de Gaulle.” Couraud’s unusual but real military career has been documented by Colonel Roger Flamand in L’Inconnu du French Squadron (privately published, 1983). Also, Mary Jayne Gold, Crossroads Marseilles 1940 (New York: Doubleday, 1980).
46 Gold, Crossroads Marseilles 1940.
47 Interview with Mary Jayne Gold (Crown).
49 Gold, Crossroads Marseilles 1940.
50 Interview with Charles Fawcett (Crown).
51 Gold, Crossroads Marseilles 1940, p 164.
52 Interview with Charles Fawcett (Crown).
53 Interview with Charles Fawcett (Crown). Also Surrender on Demand. Although Fawcett and others remember Ball’s first name to have been Leon, Fry refers to him as Dick.
54 Interview with Mary Jayne Gold (Crown).
55 Hiram Bingham IV to Rose Bingham, Sept. 12, 1939 (Bingham Family Collection).
56 CF (Tracy Strong, Jr. Collection).
57 Interview with Tracy Strong, Jr. (Crown).
58 Interview with Miriam Davenport Ebel (Crown).
59 How little we know about American relief work in Europe during that time—its strengths, its weaknesses, its dilemmas. Why has there never been an academic conference on this subject? Why is it that to this day, with the exception of the interview cited here, Tracy Strong, Jr.—a
vigorous, well-traveled gentleman with a good memory—has never been interviewed by anyone about his significant experiences in France, Switzerland and Germany from 1940 to 1949? Of course, as always, such action of the few underscores the indifference of the many. Americans, to be sure, still find it easier to ignore all that was done—all that could be done. How else is one to explain how long it has taken the Fry mission to surface?

60 Interview with Jack Jacobs (Crown).
61 Department of State telegram to U. S. Consulate, Marseille, Sept. 18, 1940 (CF photocopy).
62 Marseille American Consul General Hugh S. Fullerton, May 26, 1941 (CF photocopy).
64 Varian Fry to Eileen Fry (COL).
65 Interview with Albert O. Hirschman (Crown).
66 Interview with Lisa Fittko (Crown).
67 Varian Fry to his mother, Nov. 3, 1940 (COL).
68 Interview with Mary Jayne Gold (Crown).
69 Interview with Albert Hirschman (Crown).
70 Varian Fry (unsigned), memo, Lisbon, Aug. 9, 1940 (CF photocopy).
72 Daniel Bénédite to Varian Fry (COL).
73 Interviews with Diego Masson and Luis Masson (Crown).
74 Interview with Charles Fawcett (Crown).
75 Fry, *Surrender on Demand*, original draft, diary, Feb. 12, 1941 (COL/CF reconstruction). The reference is to anti-Nazi lawyer Alfred Apfel.
76 Fry, *Surrender*, p. 177; Marino, *A Quiet American*, p. 264
77 Fry, *Surrender on Demand*, original draft, diary, Feb. 10, 1941 (COL/CF reconstruction).
78 Annette Riley Fry communication to Pierre Sauvage.
79 Varian Fry to Eileen Fry (COL).
80 Interview with Stéphane Hessel (Crown).
81 Fry, *Surrender on Demand*, original draft, diary, March 8, 1941 (COL/CF reconstruction). Adapted by Varian Fry from Varian Fry to his mother, March 8, 1941 (COL).
82 Varian Fry to Eileen Fry, Oct. 27, 1940 (COL).
83 Varian Fry to Eileen Fry, Jan. 5, 1941 (COL).
84 Eileen Fry to Varian Fry, Jan. 21, 1941 (COL)
85 Eileen Fry to Varian Fry, Jan. 28, 1941 (COL).
86 Varian Fry, memo to EMERSCUE [Emergency Rescue Committee], New York, Jan. 21, 1941 (COL).
87 Varian Fry, memo (unsigned), Jan. 14, 1941 (COL).
88 Harold Oram to Varian Fry, Jan. 22, 1941 (COL)
89 Varian Fry cable to Museum of Modern Art, April 21, 1941 (COL).
90 Eileen Fry to Varian Fry, Feb. 21, 1941 (COL)
91 Varian Fry, *Surrender on Demand*, original draft, p. 700 (COL/CF reconstruction).
92 Interview with Reynold Levy (Crown).
93 CF photocopy.
Robert J. Ullman to George K. Bowden, Memo, Sept. 16, 1942, about his talk with David Seiferheld, Treasurer and Active Executive [sic] of the Emergency Rescue Committee (CF photocopy). Fry did, however, do some consulting for government intelligence services. Varian Fry to Herbert H. Lehman, Dec. 23, 1942 (COL).

Varian Fry to Eileen Fry (COL).

Eileen Fry to Varian Fry, Feb. 18, 1941 (COL).

Varian Fry to Eileen Fry (COL).

Varian Fry cable, Oct. 1, 1940 (COL).

Varian Fry, Surrender on Demand.


Lucie Heymann report, Sept. 2, 1941 (COL).

Varian Fry to Albert Hirschman, Nov. 31, 1941 (COL).

Eleanor Roosevelt to Sumner Welles, Dec. 9, 1940 (CF photocopy).

Eleanor Roosevelt to Eileen Fry, May 13, 1941 (COL).

Confidential document, Archives départementales des Bouches-du-Rhône (CF photocopy).

Memo, Jan. 3, 1941 (CF photocopy). It may not be coincidental that there were, apparently, attempts to entrap Fry. “They are even trying to 'frame' me on a morals charge, Fry writes to his wife “sending both girls and boys. I must sound as though I had gone stark nuts, but it is the plain truth. Needless to say, I don't touch the people sent any more than I touch the 'important documents' which people tell me someone told them I could get to the British authorities for them. Yet it is a strain receiving so many provocateurs. I would like to know who it is who sends them.” May 31, 1941, COL. Attacks on Fry’s “morality,” were apparently circulated, since they even reached his wife. "Your stories about being attemptedly [sic] framed on morals charges were interesting,” Eileen Fry responds, "as the stories had already reached me in garbled form, more disturbing than your explanation, which I was glad to get." July 8, 1941, COL.

Communication from daughter of fired receptionist to Pierre Sauvage.

“Doug” was Douglas MacArthur II. “Woodie” was Woodruff Wallner.

Hugh S. Fullerton to H. Freeman Matthews, Oct. 15, 1941 (CF photocopy).

Interview with Charles Fawcett (Crown).

Putting forward a different view of Consul General Fullerton as cowardly but “relatively amenable,” Andy Marino quotes the Unitarian Service Committee’s Howard L. Brooks, who served in France in 1941: “Fullerton understood Fry’s job and was sympathetic to it.” Nothing in the record bears out this assertion.

Varian Fry to Eileen Fry, Sept. 7, 1941 (COL).

American Marseille Consul General in 2000 Samuel V. Brock was instrumental in obtaining the honors for Varian Fry. Interview with Samuel V. Brock (Crown).

Born to wealth and social status, Bingham died unrecognized and impoverished.

William L Peck Memorandum on immigration policy at the Marseille consulate, March 6, 1941 (CF photocopy).

Hugh S. Fullerton to Fry, letter, April 14, 1941. (CF photocopy).
A bizarre footnote to Fry's stay Marseille is the allegation put forward independently in the early 1960s by writers Victor Alexandrov and Marcel Wallenstein, and later repeated by Charles Wighton, that Adolf Eichmann met with Varian Fry in Marseille in 1940 thinking that Fry represented the American government (!) and wishing to negotiate the possibility of letting shiploads of Jews go to Madagascar, in return for $5,000 for each Jew and in the context of the attempt to reach a negotiated peace with Great Britain. Fry later denied that such an encounter or such discussions ever happened, even with Nazi officials other than Eichmann, and there is not a shred of credible evidence that they did. However, the notion of such a discussion taking place between German and American representatives in the summer or early fall of 1940 is not inherently absurd from a strictly political point-of-view, according to historian Yehuda Bauer, and given the good connections that Alexandrov and Wallenstein seem to have had with intelligence services—and the fact that they get some relatively obscure details right, though their accounts are riddled with absurdities—it would certainly be interesting to know how and why this completely forgotten story ever surfaced in the first place. See Victor Alexandrov, *Six Millions de Morts: La Vie d’Adolf Eichmann* (Paris, 1960); Marcel Wallenstein, “How ‘the Blackest Nazi’ Tried To Bribe the U. S. With Jewish Lives,” Kansas City Star, Aug. 14, 1960; Charles Wighton, *Eichmann: His Career and His Crimes* (London, 1961).

Interview with Yehuda Bauer (*Crown*).


Burrin, *Hitler and the Jews*.

Interviews with Christopher R. Browning and Richard Breitman (*Crown*).


Breitman, *Official Secrets*.


Sumner Welles memo to Franklin D. Roosevelt, Dec. 21, 1940 (CF photocopy).

Wyman, Paper Walls, p. 22.

*Fortune*, April 1939. Also interview with Haim Genizi (Crown). According to Fortune, 83% of respondents would be opposed to a bill “to open the doors of the U. S. to a larger number of European refugees than now admitted under our immigration quotas.” 8.79% of respondents were in favor of opening up the quotas.

By D-Day, according to one hopefully inaccurate poll, Americans viewed Jews as a larger threat to the U.S. than the Nazis or the Japanese.


Interview with Christopher R. Browning (Crown).


Ibid., p. 61.

Ibid.

Nazi invulnerability to public opinion has been overstated. The still little known Rosenstrasse Street public protests in Berlin in 1943, which defied the Gestapo and succeeded in reversing a planned deportation of Jews, suggests that direct challenges to the Final Solution were not necessarily doomed to failure. The story was discovered, researched and recounted by Nathan Stoltzfus, *Resistance of the Heart: Intermarriage and the Rosenstrasse Protest in Nazi Germany* (New York: Norton, 1996). The book will be the basis of a planned Chambon Foundation documentary, as well as a dramatic motion picture to be produced by Pierre Sauvage.


Ibid.

Varian Fry to David S. Wyman, April 29, 1965 (CF).

Interview with David S. Wyman (Crown).

Wyman, Paper Walls. Wyman was tougher on President Roosevelt’s record with regard to the Holocaust in the subsequent *The Abandonment of the Jews: America and the Holocaust*.

Deutsche Bibliotek, Frankfurt, Germany.


Interview with Karel Sternberg (Crown).

Fry, *Surrender on Demand*, p. ix.

Varian Fry to Albert Hirschman, Nov. 3, 1941 (COL).

Varian Fry’s original negatives from 1940-41 are in the archives of the Chambon Foundation, along with the Miriam Davenport Ebel collection, the Mary Jayne Gold collection, the Justus Rosenberg collection, the Tracy Strong, Jr. collection, and other photographs and documents relating to that time.

Varian Fry, *Surrender on Demand*, original draft, p. 719 (COL/CF reconstruction)
Varian Fry to Adolfo Diaz, Jan. 22, 1942 (COL).
Varian Fry to Eileen Fry, Sept. 4, 1942 (COL).
Interview with Edmonde Charles-Roux (Crown).
Bénédite, La filière marseillaise, p. 333.
Paul Schmierer to “Charlie” and “Kathleen,” Aug. 30, 1942, cited by Varian Fry, Surrender on Demand, original manuscript, p. 846 (COL/CF reconstruction).
Varian Fry, “The Massacre of the Jews” (The New Republic, Dec. 21, 1942). Why has there never been an anthology of contemporaneous writings about the Holocaust? Could it be, yet again, that there is a reluctance to face everything that a few caring people suspected, knew. said, shouted?
Varian Fry, COL.
Varian Fry to Robert N. Linscott, (COL).
COL (original papers) and CF (reconstituted original draft in photocopy, assembled by Pierre Sauvage).
Varian Fry to Paul Kohner, July 11, 1945 (COL).
The U. S. Holocaust Memorial Museum’s first temporary exhibit when the museum opened its doors in 1993, “Assignment: Rescue—The Story of Varian Fry and the Emergency Rescue Committee” (initiated and supervised by Susan W. Morgenstein) was largely responsible for initiating the growing interest in the rescue mission in the 1990s. Donald Carroll, Cynthia Jaffee McCabe, Henry and Elizabeth Urrows, and Andrew St. George wrote the first important articles on the Varian Fry mission.
Surrender on Demand, original draft, foreword (COL/CF reconstruction).
Justus Rosenberg to Miriam Davenport Burke, June 23, 1952 (CF).
Miriam Davenport Burke to Justus Rosenberg, June 30, 1952 (CF).
Interview with Justus Rosenberg (Crown).
Miriam Davenport Burke to Justus Rosenberg, June 30, 1952 (CF).
Interview with Stanton Catlin (Crown).
Interview with Albert Hirschman (Crown).
Interview with Hélène Bénédite (Crown).
The full quotation is as follows: “There are men who rise refreshed on hearing a threat; men to whom a crisis which intimidates and paralyses the majority, demanding not the faculties of prudence and thrift, but comprehension, immovableness, the readiness of sacrifices, comes graceful and beloved as a bride.”
Gold, Crossroads Marseille 1940.

© Copyright 2007, Chambon Foundation. All rights reserved. Revised: July 07, 2007
MIRIAM DAVENPORT EBEL
(1915 - 1999)
Miriam Davenport Ebel died of cancer in Mt. Pleasant, Michigan, September 13, 1999. For several months in 1940, she worked closely with Varian Fry in Marseille, France, helping to save many endangered artists, intellectuals and anti-Nazi refugees.

Born in Boston, Massachusetts, June 6, 1915, Miriam Davenport had studied art and architecture history at Smith College before spending a year at in N. Y. U.’s Graduate Institute of Fine Arts. Her parents had died during her last two years of undergraduate studies, leaving large debts and a young brother. Leaving for France, she pursued her studies on a Carnegie summer art scholarship, and then at the
tuition-free University of Paris' Institut d'Art et d'Archéologie, also taking painting classes with cubist Andre Lhote.

During the German invasion of France in May, 1940, with the Sorbonne closing down, Ebel was unable to get expired passport and identity card renewed, until helped by French friends, she managed to get an ID card renewed for transfer of study to University of Toulouse. At this time, Charles Wolff, a journalist neighbor of a friend, expressed the opinion that Germans would be in Paris in seven to ten days. Ebel left the next day for Toulouse on the last train to run on time.

Charles Wolff soon turned up himself in Toulouse. Through him, after the terms of the Armistice became known, she met Walter Mehring, the poet high on Hitler’s wanted list, Konrad Heiden, Hitler's unflattering biographer, and Katia Landau, whose husband had been murdered by the Barcelona Communists.

Ebel later remembered that Wolff, Heiden, and Landau, had said that their only hope and that of others in their situation was to be “wrapped in the American flag.” Ebel took it upon herself to go to Marseille, the main city in the unoccupied zone of France, to find out how to go about this.

Ebel also met an American expatriate heiress, Mary Jayne Gold, and they soon became fast friends, united in their desire to do something for the threatened refugees. Nothing much seemed possible until Walter Mehring learned of the arrival in Marseille of an American named Varian Fry, and sent Ebel to him for help. On Aug. 27, 1940, less than two weeks after Fry's arrival, Ebel was invited to join Fry's staff. Later she persuaded a reluctant Fry to accept Mary Jayne Gold too as a staffer, and also recommended future staffers Jean Gemahling and Daniel Bénédite and the latter's British wife Theodora.

Ebel liked to recall that her three-year residence in Tenney House, a cooperative for sixteen students at Smith College, had interesting consequences at this time for both the staff and the "clients" of the Centre Américain de Secours—Fry's newly founded American Relief Center. Ebel's happy memories of cooperative living at Smith persuaded Mary Jayne Gold and Theodora Bénédite that renting an immense house, Villa Air-Bel, as a shared expense “residential hotel” would be a great improvement on the tiny villa that they had had in mind. Thus the famous last gathering place of the Surrealists came about. Miriam's clients, the André Bretons and Victor Serge and his family, moved right in on the first night.
At the very end of October, planning to return shortly, Miriam left for Ljubljana, Yugoslavia, hoping to rescue and bring to France her desperately ill fiancé. The French refusal to grant her a visa frustrated all attempts to return. In April 1941, following the annexation of Ljubljana by Italy, she and her fiancé were secretly married. After much work and many close calls, the couple managed to sail from Lisbon for the USA on the Friday following Pearl Harbor.

At home, she worked for various worthy causes: public relations and fund-raising for the International Rescue and Relief Committee, the Progressive Schools Committee for Refugee Children, the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, and for the H. L. Oram public relations firm. Later she worked for the American Council of Learned Societies’ Committee for the Protection of Cultural Treasures in War Areas, preparing maps and lists for the Armed Forces to prevent unnecessary bombing and looting. She also established a photographic archive for the A. C. L. S. of subsequent damage discovered upon liberation.

After marrying Professor William L. M. Burke, a wartime colleague and the Director of the Index of Christian Art at Princeton, Ebel managed the Princeton office of the Emergency Committee of Atomic Scientists for Albert Einstein. Later she helped Professor Frederick Stohlman with his work on Limoges champlevé enamels. In 1951 the Burkes moved to the University of Iowa where Miriam promptly began graduate work in art to become, in two years, an exhibiting and prize-winning painter and sculptor.
Suddenly widowed in 1961 and pressed for funds, she began teaching art and French to her farming neighbors' children in Riverside, Iowa. There she met and married Charles Ebel, an archaeologist and a scholar in ancient history, also returning to the University of Iowa where, while teaching French, she earned a Ph.D. in 1973. Later, the Ebels moved to Michigan, where Dr. Ebel is Professor of History at Central Michigan University. Miriam, in her free time, continued research and publishing in French 18th century literature, doing a French thesis on the 18th century French writer Crébillon fils.

A witty and shrewd raconteur, blessed with an astonishing memory for detail, Miriam Davenport Ebel was an active participant in all projects and public events relating to the Fry mission, and will be a key figure in Pierre Sauvage's upcoming feature documentary about the mission, *And Crown Thy Good: Varian Fry in Marseille*. She had a particular fondness for the fields of Iowa, where she had lived happily with Dr. Burke and later Dr. Ebel. It was near these fields that she was put to rest on a beautiful day in September 1999.
overlooking Marseille's *vieux port*
 enjoying some fond memories
 outside the former U. S. Consulate
 in Marseille

*An Unsentimental Education*

a memoir by
Miriam Davenport Ebel
(1915-1999)

© 1999, Miriam Davenport Ebel.
Posted at [www.varianfry.org](http://www.varianfry.org) with the permission of Dr. Charles Ebel.

FOR BOOK REVIEWERS & OTHER DIRECTLY INTERESTED PARTIES

Rosemary Sullivan's new book *Villa Bel-Air* draws on this memoir.

Example

About two weeks after the Germans had begun their invasion of the Low Countries [in 1940], I boarded a train in Ljubljana, Yugoslavia, bound for Paris via
Italy. I intended to sit for examinations at the University of Paris. My fiancé was to follow later to continue his studies towards a doctorate. Such sensible and important plans were not to be altered because of recent international complications.

The train filled up quickly as it rolled across Italy, collecting newly mobilized soldiers in coarse, ill-fitting uniforms. Two of them shared my compartment, along with five middle-aged civilians who were engrossed in the newspapers they had bought before getting on the train. The couple seated opposite me progressed rapidly to the inner pages, spreading the front page before my startled gaze. There, conspicuously displayed, was a large map with Paris at its center and, almost encircling the city, two thick, black arrows coming down from the Belgian border. My city surrounded? Trying as best I could to hide my tears, I fled into the corridor.

Within seconds the two soldiers from my compartment were at my side. One, putting his arm gently around my shoulders asked, in Italian, “What is the trouble, Signora?” My meager Italian had also fled; I answered in French, “I cannot speak Italian.” “Ah, poor Signora, my poor Signora! Your husband is at the front, isn’t he?” I could only sob. Then the second soldier joined in, “But don’t cry, Signora, please don’t cry! It will be all right. You will see; it will be all right.” The first agreed, “Yes, you will see; it will be all right, Signora, all right,” and he took out a clean handkerchief to wipe the tears from my face. I did stop crying then. Their instant sympathy and warm humanity when faced with my grief—never mind that they might soon be looking down the wrong end of “my husband’s” gun barrel—was more comforting than they could know. I did not disillusion them when I thanked them for their help.

As it turned out, the pincers had not yet closed around Paris; the train arrived on time, the weather was superb, and Paris had never been more beautiful. All was far from well, however. During that last week of May, things went from bad to worse and my own situation made similar progress.
The Netherlands and Belgium had been crushed by the German armies and, although we did not yet know it, Dunkerque was in flames. Refugees from the North were streaming through Paris on anything with wheels, war hysteria had gripped the city, and parachutists and fifth columnists were rumored to be just about everywhere. Predictably, the police were swarming all over Paris making mass round-ups and interning any and all whose papers were not in impeccable order. Unfortunately, my own American passport and French identity card had chosen this inauspicious moment to expire. These contretemps notwithstanding, I was still hoping against hope to finish my French Master's degree in June.

The rapidly fading University had cancelled its June examinations but there was still enough personnel on board to grant me permission to sit for the equivalent at the University of Toulouse. My problem was staying out of jail long enough to get there. A less than helpful American Embassy declared my plans frivolous and refused to renew my passport for other than immediate repatriation via Bordeaux. At the Prefecture of Police, the renewal of my identity card was rejected out-of-hand by a bearded lady who, with visible relish, was extending the same courtesies to everyone.

Strangely, in the middle of all this it never crossed my mind to question the wisdom of a decision that had brought me to such an impasse in the first place. A succession of events beyond my control, beginning three years earlier, had made facing dead-ends and impossible choices almost routine. Perhaps I should explain.

Shortly before I graduated from college, my father, then my mother, had died quite suddenly. Besides the wrenching shock and grief, my ten-year-old brother and I were left with a small mountain of debts and almost no money. There was no social security for us to fall back on in those days. A Smith College B.A., however magno cum honore in art history, was little more than a one-way ticket to indigence.

After a little thought, I settled on one goal—earning a professional degree. I gambled that, somehow or other, I could manage this before running out of money. There was some reason to believe that, armed with an M.A., I might get a decent job or a good graduate fellowship and make a suitable home for my brother. Fortune seemed to side with me; in 1937 I was granted a full tuition scholarship at NYU’s Graduate Institute of Fine Arts and in 1938 I received a Carnegie Summer Art Scholarship for study at the University of Paris and travel in Europe. My little brother went to stay for three months on an uncle's farm in North Carolina so that I could accept the grant.
The Institut d'art et d'archéologie had designed courses for American students who would pay tuition from their stipends. Shortly after my arrival, I was dumbfounded to discover that, normally, university tuition in France was absolutely free—even for foreigners—right through the doctorate. European students taking our courses paid no fees. They were scandalized to hear that we did. It was from them that I learned that earning at least room and board in Europe would be easy for me; I could give English conversation lessons. American English was newly respectable.

In a matter of days this proved to be true; I was offered a job. At home, I knew it would be nearly impossible to keep myself lodged and fed for one more academic year, let alone care properly for my brother, a still very upset youngster. All things considered, it seemed best to stay on in France. With some reluctance, my uncle agreed to keep my brother on the farm until my return.

By the time war broke out in 1939, I had already completed half of a licence libre and my doctoral thesis topic had been accepted. The war seemed a poor excuse to drop everything; European students were still studying. Even by the end of May 1940, like many another who had been brought up on “the miracle of the Marne,” I refused to believe that the French might capitulate to the Nazis. It was in this frame of mind that I set about trying to find someone influential to intervene for me with the authorities. When it became apparent that the obvious American pipelines had dried up, I turned to a French friend.

Marguerite had been a sought-after salonnière before her divorce from the Cubist painter, André Lhote. She still preserved from the good old days a few faithful and influential friends in the world of arts and letters. Marguerite decided to ask Professor Charles Lalo, the aesthete, for help. He was “enchanted to be of service,” asked that I be directed to his study, and there, by the light of a very dim bulb (his blackout curtains were drawn), he quickly penned a note to Monsieur le Préfet, passed it to me to read, then sealed it in an official university envelope and gave it to me to deliver. Seeing me to the door with touching politeness, he wished me every good fortune. He was about to leave town himself and I never saw him again.

His kindness won me entrée to a gilded palace where a receptionist, caparisoned in a massive gold chain, ushered me past several leather-padded doors into a high functionary’s office. There, with elaborate courtesy, my identity card was renewed for the purpose of transferring to the University of Toulouse. However, running the bureaucratic maze had cost some five precious days.
Taking the next very normal step was to have unforeseen consequences; within a little over two months I would find myself, against all probabilities, joyfully working on the shady side of French law in a resistance run by an equally unlikely American. But I am getting ahead of my story.

Grateful and euphoric, I went that very evening to thank Marguerite Lhote and to celebrate with her our triumph. I had been there for only a few minutes when one of her neighbors dropped by to give her some not-yet-official news. I can still see him standing just inside the door, a thin young man (he was tubercular) with troubled, dark eyes, a great beak of a nose, and a bald patch that shone when he removed his beret.

"Marguerite," he said, "there is no need to panic, but the time has come for you to pack up and leave for the south; you have about a week to ten days before the Germans enter Paris. The army in the north is surrounded and defeated." I remembered, then, the slightly premature map that had shocked me crossing Italy. Numbed, we talked quietly for some time before saying our goodbyes. We were all three planning to leave Paris, but we still hoped for a miracle. The good neighbor, Charles Wolff, would soon cross my path again and point my nose in an altogether new direction.

It was now about the 28\textsuperscript{th} of May. On 2 June, I signed out at the local police station, crammed all of my belongings into four suitcases and, helped by the Hôtel de l'Univers' one and only maid, found a seat on the night train to Toulouse. By the time it pulled out of the station, there was standing-room only. Dog-tired, I must have dozed off almost immediately.

Just before dawn I was awakened by a strange young man who was planning to get off at Cahors. I had been sleeping for hours on his uncomplaining shoulder, his arm around me to steady me. Terribly embarrassed, I thanked him for his kindness. "It was nothing, Mademoiselle. My pleasure." We wished each other "\textit{bonne route}" and he left. My fellow-passengers burst out laughing, "We thought he was your husband!" Ours was the last train on that line to run on time; the tracks were bombed the next day.

Toulouse, I quickly found out, had already been swamped by the Exodus. It was the designated center for Belgian refugees and for the Polish Army in France. The population had jumped from a quarter of a million to more than a million in a fortnight. People were sleeping on hotel billiard tables, in lobby armchairs, on the
grass in parks, in automobiles, and on farm carts heaped with the family’s belongings. One whole wall of the *Capitole*, the beautiful old city hall, was white with pitiful notes scratched by people seeking news of children or relatives somehow lost during the headlong flight south.

It was only after fourteen hours of walking, mostly under a blistering sun, that I learned, from a kind young woman, of a room in a cheap, unadvertised rooming-house. A friend of hers had vacated it that afternoon. I wasted no time fumbling my way in the blackout to the rue des Temponnières. The landlady eyed me askance. She "never rented to women; they did their laundry, washed their hair, plugged the sinks, and filled up the septic tank too fast." After falsely assuring her that I relied on hairdressers and had not done my own laundry in years, she let me have the room. How many days were spent after that getting myself properly registered at the University and with the police I can no longer recall; in the general confusion one had to endure much misdirection and endless, often fruitless, waiting-in-line. What I do remember with painful clarity is that, by the time my papers were in order, my examinations were scheduled to begin the next day, a good two weeks earlier than those cancelled in Paris. I sat for them dutifully and failed them brilliantly.

One day, not too long afterwards, Marguerite Lhote’s good neighbor spotted me on the crowded Place du Capitole, greeted me like a long-lost friend, and invited me to join him and his companions for drinks. He was, I soon discovered, a well-known musicologist, journalist, militant Socialist, and impassioned anti-Communist. He had regularly sheltered Spanish Republican refugees in the basement of his little house in the rue Boulard, and had often intervened with the police on behalf of German intellectual and political refugees. Somehow or other, a friend of his in the Paris Prefecture had helped in this.

In Toulouse, Wolff and his friends were running a kind of informal club in a small café on the Place du Capitole. Their table became for me a kind of political seminar where I quickly lost my American innocence. Socialists, I gathered, came in many shapes and sizes: Christian, Fabian, Vegetarian, Anarchist and Marxist. God alone knew them all! Nor were Marxists all of a piece; some were Leninists, some Trotskyites, some Stalinists. Members of the Communist Party were all Stalinists with an appetite for eliminating dissident left-wingers before fighting Nazis and Fascists. We all spent a good part of our days and most of our evenings in the café, reading newspapers, discussing global politics, and listening to the loudspeakers that had been installed on the square and which, from time to time, gave the latest news. It was unrelentingly bad. On June 10, Italy declared war on France. This was scarcely a military threat but it eliminated any chance of my applying for an Italian transit visa in France. I was effectively cut off from my fiancé in Yugoslavia. On June 17, Pétain...
sought an armistice with Germany. From London, on June 18, De Gaulle called on his compatriots to carry on the struggle. It was at about this time that I got my last postcard from Yugoslavia telling me that my fiancé had fallen gravely ill.

The Armistice was signed on June 22. On that day Marshal Pétain agreed to surrender on demand the thousands of anti-Nazis who had found political asylum in France. With one stroke of the pen he had betrayed the ideals of the République. We knew then that a whole world had come to an end and the future had abruptly disappeared. Pétain's new government was festooned with names that were anathema to anyone who loved democracy. Among its first decrees were the suppression of the national anthem, La Marseillaise, and the French motto, Liberty, Equality, Fraternity; the new watchword was to be Work, Family, Fatherland. What, if anything, one was supposed to sing I cannot recall: We were tempted to try “It’s a Long Way to Tipperary.” The only good news was that we were in the unoccupied zone. For the rest, we felt only consternation and helpless rage. Perversely, Nature went on favoring the enemy with intensely blue skies, dazzling sunlight, and luminous shade.

Our small circle tried to make the best of what was left, substituting irony, laughter, and song for tears. Pol Ferjac, a Canard enchaîné [French satirical weekly] cartoonist, rose to sublime heights of wit. Our lively airplane mechanic poked fun at la-di-da French, adorning his sentences with outrageous imperfect subjunctives. My own limited repertory of American folk-songs and Afro-American spirituals was welcomed as hopeful, even mildly subversive (the Yanks are coming?). In exchange, our resident musicologist taught me ribald French folk-songs. My education did not stop there.

Wolff took me with him to the Socialists' headquarters in Toulouse. There, off a courtyard, was the Cinéma Pax, their moving-picture house. A large banner, suspended above the entrance, proclaimed its annual closure. It was, however, open for other business; it had been strewn with straw and converted into a dormitory for refugees. Whether by accident or design, these were largely political or intellectual refugees although, among their number, were French trade-unionists and (I think they slept there) some Alsatian policemen who had no intention of going home.

It was here that I met Katia Landau. Her late husband, a leader of the P.O.U.M., had been murdered by the Stalinists in Barcelona. She had been arrested at the same time and long after his death she was still imprisoned. In protest, she inspired her fellow-inmates to join her in a hunger strike and quickly became a venerated heroine. When, for a few days, the P.O.U.M. regained power, her comrades put her on a plane bound for Paris. There, deeply depressed, she tried unsuccessfully
to take her own life. I have a vivid memory of her in Toulouse, a diminutive, very beautiful young woman with enormous hazel eyes, a gentle manner, and a keen intelligence.

One day we were chatting in the Cinéma courtyard when Katia touched my arm, saying, "Don't look now but standing near the entrance is a fat little man with a notebook. He was my jailer in Barcelona and he is writing down the names of people staying here. I must get away from this place. We are all in danger. He will see to it that the Gestapo knows where to find us. That is how they work." Katia shared my room for a bit.

In the Cinéma Pax I also met Konrad Heiden, Hitler's unflattering biographer. Another guest in its straw was a fifteen-year-old boy, the son of Danzig Jews, who had biked down from his collège in Paris with a pal. Both kids had only the clothes on their backs and a change of underwear, but they were madly cheerful and prone to clowning. They did much in their short stay in the Pax to cheer the sadder and wiser guests. The Danzig boy, Justus Rosenberg, later turned up in Marseilles where I renamed him “Gussie” and introduced him to my friends.

One day, when Wolff and I were walking in the Place du Capitole, I recognized a sharp-faced little man coming towards Wolff with a broad smile and outstretched hand. I had known him on a "Bonjour, Monsieur" basis in my hotel in Paris where he usually carried a bottle of wine in a paper bag under one arm. Wolff greeted him warmly and introduced him to me as Monsieur Mehring. The latter said, "Oh, but we have already met in Paris." When Monsieur Mehring had gone on his way, Wolff asked me if I really knew who he was. "No, not really." I learned, then, that Walter Mehring was one of Germany’s most famous young poets, that he had written popular anti-Nazi songs, and that he was very high on the Nazi’s list of wanted men.

Towards the end of my stay in Toulouse—I had been waiting for the trains to start running again and for safe-conducts to be issued—Wolff informed me that he was giving up his hotel room for a couple of days to the mother of his friend, Daniel Bénédite, the "très chic type" in the Paris Prefecture who had been so helpful to political refugees. Madame Bénédite was coming to Toulouse to take back her grandson from an American friend to whom she had entrusted the child for safety's sake during the flight south. The understanding had been that the American friend would take the boy with her to the United States; he had an aunt in Hanover, New Hampshire. The infant's father was a liaison officer with the British Expeditionary Forces and God alone knew his present whereabouts. Would I like to meet the American woman? She was an interesting person, flew her own airplane and that sort
of thing. By then I was only too happy to meet a compatriot. It was agreed that Wolff and I would meet her and the baby, Peterkin, at the train and guide them to Wolff’s hotel.

After the train from Bordeaux had pulled in, Wolff, exclaiming “There they are!”, pointed out what seemed to me to be a very young girl, obviously American, wearing a pink linen suit, ankle socks, and sandals. Big, beautiful, and blonde, she had a splendidly relaxed, no-nonsense air about her. Better, she soon revealed a warm sense of humor. Mary Jayne Gold and I became friends at first sight; our friendship has lasted a lifetime. Before she left, over a morning coffee at Tortoni’s, she told me that she was a rich woman and that, should I run short of cash, she would love to help out. She was planning to go fetch her little dog from where she had left him on the flight south, then go on to Marseilles where she would cable home for money and return to the States. She then gave me the address of her homme d’affaires in Chicago and we said goodbye.

Miriam Davenport Ebel in Marseille in 1997, during production of And Crown Thy Good

Miriam Davenport Ebel (right), with Mary Jayne Gold, during production of And Crown Thy Good, two months before her old buddy’s death in 1997

My own plan was to go to Marseilles, have my passport renewed, and see about returning to Yugoslavia to rescue my fiancé somehow or other. A year earlier he had seen me through a long and dangerous illness and I owed him much. It was already clear to me that, sooner or later, Yugoslavia would fall to the Nazis.
Before I left for Marseilles, Wolff, Konrad Heiden, and Katia Landau impressed upon me the urgency of finding some way to “wrap anti-Nazis in the American flag, their only possible salvation.” All agreed that Marseilles was the only place to search. Thinking this would be easy, I left all fired up. Little did I know!

After a long night on a crowded train, I finally arrived in Marseilles to face the usual problems. The city was jammed with refugees from the north waiting to return, demobilized soldiers awaiting transport home, and crowds of foreigners who could not go home then or, perhaps, ever. There were few taxis and the trams were packed full. After a frantic, day-long search, I found a modest hotel room that I could ill afford; I was down to my last $125.00. After registering, I went back down into the street where I found Walter Mehring standing on the sidewalk looking like a little tramp. He greeted me with obvious pleasure and asked if I had found a room. When I said that I just now had, he asked if he might share it with me for the night; he had not slept in a bed for days. To this day I feel guilty for having refused him.

The next day I dutifully registered with the police, then went to the American Consulate where the receptionist, a hard-looking, peroxide blonde, directed me to take a tram to the annex in a château well out of town. There, a subordinate informed me, from an almost prone position with his feet up on the desk, that passports were being renewed only for repatriation, transport to be provided at the individual’s expense. Although I still carried a paid-in-full return passage on the French Line, repatriation was not for me. In fact, the French Line was no longer sailing to the States.

Was anyone, I asked, doing anything for anti-Nazi refugees trapped in France? No. Were there any American organizations in Marseilles looking after their needs? No, none. Oddly, the Consulate’s walls were decorated with portraits of Washington, Lincoln, and Herbert Hoover. Franklin Roosevelt’s picture was nowhere to be seen.

On the way out I noticed a long queue of refugees waiting to be seen, most of them speaking German. I also observed the Consulate’s doorman being offensively rude to them. A strong odor of xenophobia and anti-Semitism permeated the premises.

I was learning fast. The business of my government was business; American interests overseas were economic interests. Americans with jobs or investments overseas had no passport problems; those with moral obligations or family ties were a nuisance, their pleas worthless irrelevancies. Now I understood. I returned to the
main Consulate and asked, firmly, to see the Consul General. In due course I was shown into his office. I told him that I had a job teaching English in Yugoslavia (this was true), that I needed to get back to my work, and that my passport needed renewing. It seemed unwise to return to the States where I should be unemployed. He saw to it that my passport was renewed and advised me to write the Consul General in Geneva for advice on how to go about getting an Italian transit visa. After thanking him profusely, I left. Because soap was in very short supply, I lifted a cake in the ladies' room on the way out. It was obvious that getting to Yugoslavia was going to take months. At the Consulate I had also discovered that there was a list of Americans seeking repatriation. Mary Jayne Gold's name was on the list and I had taken down her Marseilles address.

The following morning I had a chilling experience. When I was having breakfast in a small bar, Katia Landau's Barcelona jailer walked in the door. Worse, he spotted me. (Had he been watching me?) Making his way to my table, he asked if he might join me. I asked him to be seated. “You are a friend of Katia Landau, aren't you?” “Yes, I am.” “You must know,” he went on, that she is now in great danger. I know that she doesn't trust me because we were once on different sides politically. However, I would like to help her now and I can. What she needs is French citizenship. She can get this through marriage. I can arrange a mariage blanc for her. Would you tell her this for me?” “Of course, I'd be glad to.”

While I had his attention, I decided to ask him a political question. The German-Soviet non-aggression pact was still in force and the Soviet Union was enjoying its share of Poland. “Where do you people stand, now, vis-à-vis De Gaulle?” “We are, he replied, “observing a benevolent neutrality.” “I see.” After that, I never saw him again, but I quickly wrote a note to Katia on the subject. More than ever I was persuaded of the urgency of finding help for my new friends.

By now my own urgent problems were closing in; my funds were being drained away. Shortly, I found a new room in a squalid barrack named Hôtel Paradis Bel-Air in the rue de Madagascar. It had formerly catered to Moroccan laborers but was now filled with refugees. The room was in the attic that I shared with cooing pigeons. Water was cold, in a big pitcher that could be filled in the corridor. Such comfort cost about fifty cents a month.

Next, I found a Catholic refuge originally conceived to serve derelicts but now catering to refugees who greatly outnumbered the old regulars; flophouses and soup-kitchens were enjoying an upscale clientele. My new "restaurant" was in what had once been a handsome stone church, its sanctuary now a kitchen separated from
the nave by a wooden partition. For a few cents one was served a simple, wholesome meal with wine, all prepared and served by smiling nuns who passed the meals through windows in the wall. I remember excellent sliced tomatoes and good chic peas. There must have been some kind of fish or meat but I cannot recall what it was.

On the day that I persuaded my hotel to move me to a better room down one flight, one with running cold water and a real window, I ran into Gussie, the kid from Toulouse. He had found no place to stay and needed a roof over his head. He moved into my vacated pigeon roost.

That night I was nearly eaten alive by bedbugs. In a few days, however, the management found me another room, down one more flight and on the other side of the house. That one was clean and there I stayed until late October. It boasted of one narrow iron bed, a small table, a hard wooden chair, a small wardrobe, an enameled tin bidet, and a chamber pot.

So much settled, and my letter to the Geneva Consulate sent off by registered mail, I telephoned to Mary Jayne Gold. We met that day for lunch, brought each other up to date on our wanderings, and I filled her in on the plight of Konrad Heiden, Katia, and the others. She was horrified. Together we determined to find some way of helping them if possible. Mary Jayne was an ardent Gaullist, herself, and passionately anti-Nazi. Even her poodle, Dagobert, would bark furiously whenever one muttered "Hitler! Hitler!"

Since she was also alone in town, she suggested that we eat together. When she learned of my commitment to the Catholic refuge, she was not enthusiastic about either its ambiance or its cuisine; she suggested that I be her guest elsewhere, something that she would much prefer. I accepted with grateful alacrity.

Before long we learned—I forget how, but perhaps from Walter Mehring—that a Dr. Frank Bohn, from the American Federation of Labor, had arrived in town and was working with refugees. That seemed so promising that we wrote to him in care of the Consulate—expressing our interest in being helpful to refugees. In return we got a curt reply; he had all the help he needed, thank you.

We had already tried the American Red Cross; they were helping only the French with free milk to be distributed through French gas companies. Later, when we saw a short notice in the paper that a certain “Valerian Fry” had arrived from the
States with a boatload of canned milk, we dismissed the news with "Another milkman!"

The center of American and refugee social life in Marseilles was a café just outside of the American Consulate—the Pelikan. This became our rendezvous and favorite watering place. There were always refugees at other tables, all awaiting some miracle. Mehring, who was often among them, sometimes joined us at our table and occasionally had lunch with us. At lunch, one day, he bemoaned Europe's loss of liberties after the First World War. He cited passports and visas as an example; before 1914 only Russia and Turkey had required such nonsense. When he was a child, to travel back and forth between Paris and Berlin, one simply got on a train. Those were the good old days for dissidents.

We were again at the Café Pelikan one afternoon when Mehring, very excited and furtive-looking, came to our table to speak to me privately. I excused myself and followed him a few paces. He then told me that the man we had all been dreaming about was real and had arrived in Marseilles. This American savior was in the Hôtel Splendide, had money, access to visas, and a list of people he was supposed to rescue. His name was Varian Fry and Mehring had seen him that very day. However, on leaving Fry's room he had been picked up by the police and held for three hours for questioning. He had only now been released. Tomorrow he was supposed to return for another appointment but he was afraid to go back. Would I go, now, and ask for a new appointment in some out-of-the-way café? I should explain his fear of a second arrest.

Of course I was overjoyed to run that errand and asked him to wait for my return in the café. He looked terrified; that would be too dangerous. "All right," I replied, "I'll ask the receptionist in the Consulate to let you wait for me in their waiting-room while I run an errand for 'an ailing friend.'" This was satisfactory and that is what happened. In leaving, I remembered to advise him to help himself to the soap in the men's room.

At the Splendide I took the elevator to an upper floor. In the corridor outside of Fry's door, I took my place at the end of a line of waiting refugees, most of whom I had already seen at the Pelikan. When my turn came, the door opened into a small room facing west. It was hot from the afternoon sun. Inside the now closed door, a young man with a quiet, gentle manner listened politely to my story. At the far side of the room, working at a small table in his shirt-sleeves, was a young man with curly, dark hair, a high domed forehead, and horn-rimmed eyeglasses. I was taken over to him and introduced to Mr. Varian Fry. He rose to his feet with a questioning smile, shook hands, and offered me a chair.
Varian Fry in New York in 1944 by Philippe Halsman. (Halsman had been turned down in Marseille by Fry's committee.) Fry's inscription reads: "For Miriam, who no longer shrieks and coughs!

I explained about Mehring's arrest and fears. Fry immediately gave him a new appointment in a café for the next morning. I then asked if he were interested in learning the whereabouts of Konrad Heiden, Katia Landau, and others. He was indeed. I gave him Charles Wolff's address in Toulouse and he took notes. This done, he asked me what I was doing in Marseilles. I told him that I was waiting for visas to return to Yugoslavia, a slow and intricate process.

"Would you like a job?" Fry asked. I could hardly believe my ears. "Oh, yes! You are doing exactly what I have been dreaming of doing for a long time now." "Very well. Would you be willing to be named Secretary General of a committee that we are planning to set up? We could use a good American name like Davenport." The title, he explained, would require no work other than signing the annual report, but he could use an interviewer in the office that he was hoping to open the next week (i.e., ca. 27-28 August 1940). He could only pay me 3,000 francs a month, 750 a week in other words. He seemed to think that very little; to me it was riches. It was the salary of a lycée professor, more than twice that of a saleslady. The cost to the Committee was about twenty-seven dollars a month.

In seventh heaven I flew back to the Consulate to give Mehring the good news and then, outside, to Mary Jayne to tell her. I described Varian Fry as attractive. When she met him, eventually, she did not find him at all attractive: "Looks to me like a YMCA director." She had a marked preference for macho types with a taste for derring-do whereas I had a weakness for scholars and saints. In a way her assessment was right. We learned much later that Varian was, ostensibly, a representative of the World Committee of the YMCA and carried a letter to prove it, although he was really the emissary of the secular Emergency Rescue Committee. Nevertheless, official Christians were in Varian's funny business up to their eyeballs and almost no cloak-and-dagger types were involved.
Emerescue—our name for it was its New York cable address—had been hastily put together in part by Dr. Reinhold Niebuhr, the theologian. Its first chairman was a prominent Methodist minister. Our Lisbon contact and branch office was the Unitarian Service Committee, its director another man of the cloth. Furthermore, there was another YMCA man in Marseilles, a Mr. Donald Lowrie, who was doubling as representative of the American Friends of Czechoslovakia, a group with its own salvage agenda. Lowrie was an invaluable connection for Fry; he was a friend of Vladimir Vochoc, the Czech consul in Marseilles, a man only too happy to provide bona fide Czech passports to good anti-Nazis needing a travel document in some name other than their own.

Varian's only other acknowledged collaborator in Marseilles was the same Dr. Bohn who had given me and Mary Jayne the brush-off. Bohn's organization, the American Federation of Labor, was innocent of any ties to a church. His plan for his people—German Social Democrats and Italian Socialists—was to acquire a boat to ship the whole lot out at one time. There were two more influential, albeit not publicized, backers of Varian's work: in the United States, Eleanor Roosevelt, the President's wife, and, in Marseilles, the American Vice-Consul, Hiram Bingham.

The promised office was opened on schedule. It was one flight up in an old building in the rue Grignan, a side street near the Old Port. One entered by a long, dark corridor leading towards the rear of the building, then up a dark flight of stairs to another dark hallway leading to two rooms at the front. In the first there was some miscellaneous shelving and three or four old tables, each with two stiff, wooden chairs. In the second, Varian's office, there was his desk, some sort of table, and a place for his secretary-typist.

This space had been the place of business of a Jewish hand-bag and leather-goods merchant who had seen the handwriting on the wall. He had sold his business and donated the space rent-free to the Committee. He was still moving out when we moved in. On his last day there he left behind a few leather hand-bags telling me that we could help ourselves, if we liked. Before long the Russian novelist, Victor Serge, one of my earliest “clients,” was happy choose one for his girl friend. (It was not long thereafter that Serge brought the surrealist, André Breton, to my desk.)

We were a very mixed bag on the staff. Two of the interviewers were German ex-social workers, cold and very professional. Another was a handsome, good-natured, young Austrian Catholic aristocrat, Franzi von Hildebrand, who had once been a member of the Heimwehr. In our office he was known as Monsieur Richard. His politics were no longer what they once had been. The office treasurer and manager
was an internationally esteemed management consultant and efficiency expert, Heinz Ernst Oppenheimer. He designed our interview cards and set up our books so that everything could be accounted for under scrutiny. The books were, of course, fiddled.

Varian's secretary was a young Polish woman, Lena Fischmann, who had worked for a Jewish relief organization in Paris. She was very bright, lively, tireless, and polyglot. The German poet, Hans Sahl, praising her accomplishments, once said that she was the only person he had ever known who could speak Yiddish in six different languages. To Oppenheimer, who loved to tease, she was known as Fischport; he called me Davenfisch.

By far the most important member of the staff was the quiet young man who had opened the door to me at the Splendide. He knew how to do, and did, all of the things that Varian knew little about and was better off not doing. Albert O. Hirschman, known then as Albert Hermant, had been born in Berlin and educated in the French Gymnasium. He left Germany in 1933. By University training he was an economist. Despite his youth, he had already seen combat in the armies of the Spanish Republic and of France. Between these engagements he had found time to teach in an Italian university and do anti-Fascist underground work there.

Now he was equipped with pockets full of papers in the name of Albert Hermant, all wonderfully en règle and all false. His French army commanding officer, when defeat was inevitable, had called in those among his men who were refugees and told them to choose their names and birthplaces. He was going to give them demobilization papers as French citizens. Hirschman chose Albert Hermant, born in Philadelphia, USA. With this he was later able to get a French “certificat de vie,” and memberships in the Auberges de Jeunesse, le Club des sans club, etc. Mary Jayne and I called him Hermant-the-Varmint behind his back; Varian called him Beamish.

Another polyglot, Hermant was rather tall with large, innocent-looking gray eyes and a rare, but sweet, boyish smile, all perfect for his job. He worked mostly outside of the office, arranging black market deals to get our money, finding genuine (but false) passports and French identity cards or demobilization papers for clients in need.

Varian Fry, our boss, was the one who visited the American Consulate, paid official calls on the police, met with friendly priests or the heads of other relief agencies, and visited the clients who were too endangered to came to the office.
Some of the latter were hidden in bordellos, or *maisons de rendez-vous*, where discretion kept the police at a distance.

Varian had got his job by default. Although the Emergency Rescue Committee had been very successful in enlisting powerful support and in raising funds, it had been far less fortunate in finding someone qualified to send to France on its mission. In the end, rather apologetically, Varian had stepped forward to say that, if they should fail to find someone better, he would volunteer to go. He had had no previous experience in relief work or clandestine activity and he was only thirty-two years old. However, he could manage quite well in French and German and he had been abroad in the past. Above all, he was exceptionally well-read and familiar with the works of the writers and artists on the list of those to be rescued. His offer was accepted. Consequently, after getting a leave of absence from his editorial job with Foreign Policy Association Books, he boarded the Pan-American Clipper in early August, carrying with him enough clothing for a summer vacation abroad, an air mattress, a down-filled sleeping bag (he had heard that accommodations were in short supply), a list of two hundred people to be rescued if he could find them, the addresses of several individuals who might be helpful, three thousand dollars in cash taped to his leg, and a letter of recommendation signed by Sumner Welles.

As it turned out, a better man could not have been chosen for the job. Committed, self-righteous, and publicly imperturbable, he was, in addition, always correctly got-up in a well-tailored (newly purchased at Brooks Brothers) pin-striped suit, Finchley shirts with detachable collars, good cuff-links, good shoes, a Patek-Philippe watch, and a Homburg hat. A Hotchkiss old-boy and a Harvard graduate in Classics, he had the bearing to match, that of a full-blown American "preppie." His direct, unblinking regard and cordial, impersonal smile spoke louder than words. “I am a pleasant enough fellow, my business is above reproach, and I shall not be deterred.”

With us and with our clients he was warm, sensitive, witty, and relaxed. By the end of the day he was usually well lubricated with one—or several—of the *grands crus* of Claret or Burgundy, topped off by some old Armagnac with his coffee. At our conferences in his hotel room (he had moved to a large room) he sat about in his underwear—Black Watch or Royal Stuart plaid boxer shorts—although we all remained fully clad. Here he became sometimes playful, sometimes ribald, sometimes raucous. (We all did.) Although we were acutely aware of the gravity of our deliberations and the inevitably tragic consequences of our decisions for many of the supplicants, the atmosphere was far from conspiratorial or dreary. Occasionally the occupants of neighboring rooms would complain about our loud “parties.”
These conferences marked the end of long, hard-working days. Ostensibly we were a general relief agency; no sign at the door said more than Centre Américain de Secours, a bland American aid center. When asked what we were doing, we replied that we were there to advise people on how to emigrate to America and to give financial assistance where needed—all perfectly legal. Our financial assistance was either enough to live on and/or travel on, or none; general relief cases were sent to other agencies. When we opened at eight every morning, a long, snaking queue of desperate people was already jamming the two corridors and the flight of stairs leading to our office.

From eight until noon we interviewed as many as we decently could. I know that I saw some forty every day and the others saw as many. After the sacred two hours of lunch, we began our conferences in the office, stopped at seven for dinner, ate between seven and nine, and then went to Varian's room to continue conferring. Before the next day we had to decide among us who could be helped and who not. Our day usually ended between midnight and one a.m. This went on seven days a week. The only leisure time was mealtime and, at times, that was business, too.

In the beginning I was timid in these conferences because of my utter inexperience and a mistaken idea that the others were more knowledgeable. I remember with gratitude how Hermant stiffened my backbone by insisting, in private, that I was every bit as good a judge of merit as the others and that I should defend my clients forcefully. I thereupon became as pushy as the pushiest and many of my people enjoyed instant success.

Early on our staff was augmented by two more Americans. One, Charles, a southern boy from South Carolina, was a young artist, athlete, and jazz trumpeter. The other, Dick [Leon] Ball, was a big, tough expatriate who had a lard factory someplace in France. Both had served in the American Volunteer Ambulance Corps and both were mixed up in trying to help stranded British Expeditionary Force men get back to England. Charlie became our doorman and receptionist, dressed in his only suit of clothes, his uniform. His friendly smile reassured our clients and his uniform made us look respectable. Dick Ball did not work in the office; he became our sheep-dog for herding the more helpless of our clientele over the Franco-Spanish border. Before long Walter Mehring joined the crew as a consultant on the background of lesser-known German and Austrian applicants; he was extremely knowledgeable and scrupulously fair. The poet, Hans Sahl, played a similar role.

Of course, our real purpose—and the police understood this—was the exportation, as expeditiously as possible, of people the Gestapo would like to catch.
For the most part, at that moment, the French officials still in place were decent enough to try not to notice our activities until forced to. The uniformed members of the German and Italian Armistice Commissions were in town and much in evidence on the Canebière, however, and this did make everyone a bit nervous. Nevertheless, during the first six weeks we did a land-office business.

Technically, the only way out for our people was through Spain to Portugal. For this one needed, in principle, a valid passport, an overseas visa, Portuguese and Spanish transit visas, a French exit visa, and a safe-conduct to the frontier. Our problems stemmed from the fact that many of our people were stateless and had no passports at all, that they could not get French exit visas, and that, for many, waiting to have an American visa approved might take a fatally long time. For some, temporary visitor’s visas designated "in lieu of passport" were already awaiting them at the American Consulate. If the person were not too well known, Portuguese and Spanish visas could be put on these documents by the appropriate consulates in Marseilles. Thereafter, the only remaining hurdles were traveling in France without a safe-conduct and crossing into Spain without an exit visa. The real trouble was that the American visa could be issued only in the person’s real name, something far too risky for famous anti-Nazis or anti-Fascists. (By the time Klaus Barbie—the “Butcher of Lyons”—came along, this rule had conveniently been changed.).

In the first few weeks Varian was able, through Donald Lowrie’s friendship with the Czech consul, to get genuine Czech passports bearing our clients’ own pictures and names of their choosing. On these they got Siamese, Chinese, or Belgian Congo overseas visas, and the necessary Portuguese and Spanish transit visas. If they already had their American visitor’s visa, that was pocketed. Konrad Heiden was one of the early beneficiaries, but the unfortunate Katia Landau had to wait for months for her chance to escape to Mexico.

At the Spanish border, if the French guards were pleasant, our people might get to cross over on the train. If not, they had to dismount and climb over the hill on foot. To help in this Varian kept, behind his mirror, a map of the path furnished by earlier, enterprising refugees. Departing clients were allowed to make a copy. What they absolutely had to do was seek out the Spanish border post to get an entry stamp placed on their Spanish visas. Those who overlooked this detail ended up in the Figueras concentration camp.

To avoid creating suspicion caused by a flood of Czechs crossing into Spain bound for improbable places, Hermant also managed to arrange for Lithuanian and Polish passports, and for a way to send some men to North Africa, those who could,
under no circumstances, cross Spain. This last was accomplished with false French
demobilization papers. All else failing, we went in for false French identity cards.
These at least kept people out of jail. One of our clients, Bill Freier, an Austrian
artist, made flawless identity cards. Unfortunately he was one of those whom we
were unable to help once he was found out and arrested but, God only knows how, he
managed to survive both Buchenwald and Auschwitz. As I am writing this, he still
works as a cartoonist in Paris.

As the days wore on, I became more and more depressed by the number of
endangered people who deserved help but were unknown to the old-boy network;
recommendations made in New York fixed our conditions for giving assistance. We had
our “first list” of some two hundred names which was augmented from time to time
by others approved in New York.

When I told Mary Jayne about this problem, she understood immediately and
wanted to help right the wrong. But how? She had already decided to postpone going
home but she was, herself, running out of funds. Most of her money was blocked in
the States. More could be had only by dealing in a black market where she had no
connections. She offered to give the Committee $3,000 to help those not
recommended by New York provided we could also help her to get sufficient money
for her personal needs.

Varian bristled and refused outright to have anything to do with this proposal
when I put it to him. “I know nothing about that woman! How do I know she’s
trustworthy? She’s just another rich playgirl, probably one with a passion for dukes
and duchesses and whose friends are ultra-reactionary.”

Hermant, who had witnessed this scene, later took me aside and said, “Take
me to your friend. I’ll help her.” He was as good as his word and, in a very short time,
the Centre Américain de Secours was some 330,000 francs richer. The money was
specifically earmarked for those not on the New York lists. I called the new
arrangement the “Gold List” and supervised its disbursements until I left Marseilles.
One of those who was so helped, Karol Sternberg, has just retired from directing the
International Relief Committee in New York, a descendant of our old outfit. Mary
Jayne more than repaid Hermant’s kindness by later running a successful errand for
him to get some men released from a high security concentration camp.

It was a lot easier to persuade Varian to keep on hand a huge roll of Salvation
Army meal-tickets for those who came to our door in real need, but who were only
general relief cases. At least we did not send them away empty-handed after hours of waiting. Another of our problems was already solved by Varian’s hire as interviewer of a young Rumanian, Dr. Marcel Verzeano (“Monsieur Maurice”) who doubled as our in-house physician. For dental care I drove a hard bargain with my own dentist.

There was one more possible source of distress that I nipped in the bud. Our social-workers, trained to regard supplicants as welfare cases, objected to some of our clients turning up at the best bar in town, the Cintra, for apéritifs in the evening and “wasting our money.” (How did they know?) In an angry tirade, I countered that once we had given them the money it was theirs, not ours, and that the recipients, men and women of some distinction, knew best how to keep up their morale and nourish their self-respect. We heard no more about cutting the allowances of wastrels.

Because of a frightening misadventure, before long I was called on for a ludicrous assignment—that of selecting proper men’s attire. What happened is this: early in September Walter Mehring set off for Lisbon armed with a beautiful Czech passport fully visaed and his American visa in his pocket. At Perpignan, near the Spanish border, he had to change trains. Because all had gone so smoothly, and with freedom now in sight, he decided to celebrate with a drink in a local café. Within minutes a plain clothed policeman picked him up, discovered that he was a foreigner traveling without a safe-conduct, and took him to the police station. From there Mehring was shipped by train to Saint-Cyprien, the pest-hole camp of France. Fortunately, he had not been searched so he was able to shred his lovely Czech passport in the train’s toilet and flush it onto the tracks.

Somehow he was able to inform the Committee of his whereabouts and our Corsican lawyer was able to get him, once back in Marseilles, a residence permit valid for two months. This was accomplished at the Prefecture where Mehring was excused from being present on grounds that he was too sick to come himself. The doctor’s certificate, submitted in proof, was from a doctor whom the Prefect himself had recommended.

Under these circumstances, Varian deemed it wise to put Mehring up in the Splendide and keep him out of circulation. In looking back over the events, Varian concluded that Mehring’s worn, rumpled clothing, his tousled hair, sharp little face, and furtive manner had signaled to the detective that he had found the pickpocket for whom they had long been searching. It had been our fault for not seeing to it that Mehring was properly dressed for his journey to freedom. I was instructed to go shopping with him to make sure that he was dressed like a gent.
In the best shop in town my battle began in earnest. Mehring refused adamantly even to consider a suit or, for the matter of that, a proper shirt and tie. The only shirt that he would countenance was a knit, brown cotton polo shirt. Somehow we managed to agree on a tweed sport jacket, grey flannel trousers, a belt, and decent shoes. Mehring also put a brown wool necktie in a pocket for emergencies. All this did little to improve his over-all image. Within five minutes he managed to look as if nothing draped well or buttoned straight, and as if everything had been slept in for days.

This excursion prompted another: shortly Hermant-the-Varmint emerged from his refugee cocoon in a lightweight tweed suit that would pass muster in New York, once he got there, and would permit him to wear other trousers with the jacket.

Some of our most worrisome clients, other than Mehring, were the writers Franz Werfel and Heinrich Mann. I never got to meet them for Varian always went to see them himself. Nevertheless, I heard a good deal on the subject. Werfel was overweight, aging, and recovering from a heart attack. Heinrich Mann was old, his wife no athlete. Alma Mahler Gropius Werfel was plump, rich, and loaded down with, other than her extensive wardrobe, the manuscripts of former husbands and lovers. The four could not risk going through Spain under their own names. Only Thomas Mann's son, Golo, was sufficiently unknown to risk traveling on his American visa.

Varian, who needed to go to Lisbon early in September for direct, uncensored communication with the New York office, decided to escort these people to Lisbon himself. Accordingly, after a slight delay caused by Mrs. Werfel's inability to find a suitable hatbox, the party set off with Dick Ball along in case of need. At the frontier there was trouble; exit visas were demanded and Varian alone had one. In the end, it was decided that Varian would go through on the train with all of the luggage and the others would go over the hill on foot. Thus, half guided, half carried by Dick Ball, the party made it to the Spanish frontier post. The only sour note was struck by Werfel who, at the frontier, outraged the benevolent Ball by trying to tip him. Varian, meanwhile, successfully passed through customs with seventeen pieces of luggage, more than half of them filled with women's clothing. All met successfully at Port Bou and, after a little more confusion, arrived safely in Lisbon.

Back in Marseilles, because Franzi von Hildebrand had departed two days earlier, there remained in the office only Oppenheimer, Hermant, Lena, and myself. Lena moved into Varian's room at the Splendide to hold that fort and to keep an eye on Mehring. It was during Fry's absence that Vichy moved to round up Walter Mehring,
Rudolph Hilferding, former German Finance Minister, Rudolph Breitscheid, former leader of the Social Democrats in the Reichstag, and Arthur Wolff, a Berlin criminal lawyer who had defended many of the victims of Berlin street fights.

I cannot remember how I got the news. I only recall being conducted into Varian’s room at the Splendide by Lena who was very upset. There I saw Mehring lying half unconscious on the bed and shaking from head to foot. Lena had told the detectives that Mehring was too sick to be moved but they were still insisting that he be produced. “You talk to them,” she said. I agreed but I told her that she should get in touch with our friendly American Vice-consul, Hiram Bingham, explain to him the emergency, and ask him to hurry to the hotel. I would, in the meantime, talk to the police to keep them occupied and see what I could do. Bingham had earlier rescued the writer, Lion Feuchtwanger, from a camp and hidden him in his villa. I was certain he would come over if he possibly could.

In the lobby I found the usual clutch of about half a dozen men who looked like pimps. Suddenly I recalled my empty title of General Secretary of the Centre, became conscious of the power and prestige of my country, and marched over to do battle. After introducing my titled self to these Messieurs, I proceeded to explain in vigorous French the international renown of our desperately ill poet”—and by then he really was ill—the great concern for his welfare of a good many influential men and women in the United States, not the least of whom was Mrs. Franklin Delano Roosevelt, wife of the President. She was, I underscored, taking a personal interest in Mr. Mehring’s health and well-being. Should anything happen to this sick man while they were moving him, it would be the worst possible publicity for France. If they valued America’s feelings of good will towards their suffering country, they would be well advised to leave Mr. Mehring in peace.

After some minutes of ringing changes on these themes—interrupted at intervals by apologetic police protestations that they were only following orders, that they had no authority to change their orders, that their superior had given them firm instructions, etc.—I caught sight of Hiram Bingham’s imposing figure pacing the lobby not far off, bless him! His towering height and prematurely white hair made everyone else in the lobby look insignificant. In triumph, I was able to conclude, “And, Messieurs, if you have any doubts about the truth of my statements, you have only to look over there where the American Consul is carefully ob-serving this scene, so great is his interest in the outcome!

That did it. There was a short police huddle. Then one broke away to tell me that they would telephone to their chief. On his return, he told me that the chief had
agreed to give us ten minutes to get a new doctor’s certificate for Mr. Mehring and, if we succeeded, they would leave him free.

I went to Lena to give her the news saying, “Call the doctor.” Then I returned to the police to ask them how, in God’s name, we could get all this done in ten minutes when we had no car, when taxis were non-existent, and when the doctor lived quite some distance away. “No problem, Mademoiselle; we shall drive you over in our car.” Lena came over to us to say that the doctor was writing out a new certificate. At the invitation of the police, we were escorted to their car and driven to the doctor’s office. Lena ran in to collect the certificate, we were driven back to the Splendide, and the police left satisfied. We thanked Hiram Bingham profusely and went upstairs to give Mehring the good news. Unfortunately, the other three men had already been sent off to forced residence in Arles and, of them in the end, only Wolff was saved. Months later, Walter Mehring was lucky enough to get the dormitory bunk, on a ship bound for Martinique, that had been destined for the luckless Hilferding.

Lena still had to wire our good and bad news to Varian in Lisbon. We spent some time trying to dream up an innocent-sounding message to convey the news. Eventually I thought of one based on antique medical terminology and our private nickname for Mehring, “the Baby.” We had so named him because of his diminutive size and never-ending problems. We wrote: “Baby has passed crisis but other children quarantined.” This brought Varian back to Marseilles at breakneck speed for he had understood the wire to mean that Mehring was safe but that all of the other refugees had been arrested.

Varian returned from Lisbon about September 9. A number of bad things then happened in rapid succession. Frank Bohn’s scheme to rescue all of his people and some of ours by boat blew up in his face costing him nearly all of his money. Now in very bad odor, he left for the States, abandoning his Socialists and trade-unionists to Varian’s care.

Varian was called over to the Consulate and shown a communication from the State Department received via the Embassy in Vichy. It said, “This government cannot countenance the activities as reported of Dr. Bohn and Mr. Fry and other persons in their efforts in evading the laws of countries with which the United States maintains friendly relations.” (Countries in the plural is puzzling.)

The Prefecture had not only complained to the Marseilles Consulate about Bohn and Fry but also about Lowrie’s efforts on behalf of Czech soldiers. The
Prefecture had warned the Czech Consul not to issue any more false passports. Lowrie and his friendly consul thereupon gave up helping us. Our clients who still had Czech passports with valid visas on them were advised to leave pronto.

The American Consul General advised Fry himself to leave at once before he was arrested or expelled. Fry merely wired New York to send a replacement and stayed on.

Portugal then stopped giving transit visas based on Chinese, Siamese, or Belgian Congo visas. The Honorary Panamanian Consul in Marseilles consented to issue a few, but the Spanish then closed their frontier, then reopened it, then closed it again. What would Spain do next?

The first of October brought the cruelest news. Henceforth, Portuguese consulates would have to telegraph visa requests to Lisbon for approval but, before that, they were required to see a genuine overseas visa and documentary proof of a fully paid passage on a ship sailing on a fixed date. The Spanish consulates were likewise told to cable Madrid for visas but, for men of military age from nations at war, they could not even cable.

On his way back from Lisbon, Varian had stopped off to see Sir Samuel Hoare, British Ambassador to Spain. There were well over a hundred BEF men then living in and around Marseilles, many rather ill-guarded in the Fort Saint-Jean in the Old Port. Charlie Fawcett and Leon Ball had, long since, been trying to get them back to England. Sir Samuel Hoare agreed to provide Varian with $10,000, via our New York office, so that Varian could get British officers and men out of France and, with them, if possible, some of our own people. Varian thus became a British agent.

October was such a grim month that Varian turned once more to the idea of marine transport. This boat project failed a couple of nights before I left for Yugoslavia but, luckily, without compromising any of our people this time. The night that I left, just before I got on the train, Hermant gave me a list of names to send to the New York Committee from Geneva with instructions to sweeten their bank accounts, by the sums listed, with Sir Samuel Hoare’s funds. This black market deal would protect the British as well as us. My little errand made me technically guilty of a capital offense, espionage, and it was the only time that I consciously risked my life.
In early October there were vacancies on our staff following the departures of Franz von Hildebrand and the social workers. By this time Charles Wolff’s “chic type” friend from the Paris Prefecture had been demobilized, had no intention of returning to Paris, and needed a job, as did one of his army pals. I learned about this from Mary Jayne on the day that Danny Bénédicte’s pal, a young research chemist named Jean Gemählung turned up at her hotel. It was easy to persuade Varian to hire Jean, a blonde Alsatian who spoke British public school English, fluent German, was well-read in modern German and French literature, and was an honorably discharged French veteran who had fought at Dunkerque. Jean was an ardent Gaullist and, reassuring for the authorities, a good Catholic.

Danny was another matter. “Préfecture de Police in Paris did you say? God almighty, whatever made you think we could use one of those around here? I’ve had quite enough trouble with the cops without putting one of them in my office! No! Not on your life! Ridiculous!”

However, Jean was such a success that, in a week or two, Jean and I were able to bring the matter up once more. Varian recognized that someone who knew how to write French governmentese, and who understood how prefectures worked and thought, could be extremely useful. After an interview, he hired both Danny and his English wife, Theodora. As it turned out, without these two, once Varian had been arrested and expelled from France by Vichy (at the suggestion of the American Embassy) in August, 1941, the Committee’s work would have come to an end. In fact, the Bénédictes managed to carry on our work from a mountain camp in Provence until the Liberation. Jean eventually left the Committee to set up the Service de Renseignements de Combat which became, later, part of the Mouvement de la Libération Nationale’s information services. Our Committee had given these three good hands-on training.

It was towards the end of October that Gussie became our office boy. My friend, Charles Wolff, joined our office staff only after I had left. Both would later join the French resistance, but Wolff would be tortured to death by the French Militia, the “Gestapette.”

Before my departure I made one more minor contribution that was to have interesting consequences. On one of the only two days that I took off from work, I asked Mary Jayne and Theo Bénédicte if I might go along with them on a tram trip to the country. They were planning, that Sunday, to look for a little house for themselves in the country, one with a small garden for Peterkin and lots of fresh air. Jean asked to come along, too. The four of us took the tram for Aubagne which, once past the
Cimetière Saint-Pierre, rolled along up in the hills. At La Pomme, the next station, we got off to start walking back to a café that had been spotted. There they might know of something to rent in the neighborhood. The road that we walked bordered the main Marseilles-Toulon rail line. Very shortly, on our right, we saw an underpass and, flanking it we could see two tall, stone gate posts. These were carved with the name “Air Bel.” That struck me as an omen, a sign. “I’ll be damned!” I blurted, “Look at that! That is the name of my flea-bag hotel, the Paradis-des-punaises Bel Air, in reverse. It must be good! Let’s go look!” The ever-practical Mary Jayne sounded bored, “Oh, no. That can’t be anything. Much too big.” But I had spotted a little man raking leaves in the middle distance beside the long, curving driveway. “We could always ask that little man if there is anything to rent nearby.”

That made sense to the others and Jean, who was French, was sent to inquire. As it happened, the little man was the owner of Air Bel, an unoccupied but completely furnished—linens and all—huge old house three stories tall. Out of sight from the highway, it was set on a broad, high terrace shaded by ancient plane trees and overlooking a pool with fountain, an overgrown formal garden, an immense park and, beyond, a view past mountains to the sea. At first the little man said “Nothing to rent around here.” Then, when Jean explained that those American ladies were looking for a house in the country, the little man brightened, “Americans did you say? Uh—just a minute. That could be different, but it would be very expensive. Let me get my keys.”

He returned with his keys, introduced himself as Dr. Thumin, explained that he lived next door with his sister, and led us up to Air Bel. He guided us through every room (as well as the greenhouse) on all three floors of that wonderful old mas, its furnishings pure Empire, Deuxième Empire, and “Proust.” “Too big,” said Mary Jayne. “Yes, much too big,” said Theo, and I could see why. But I remembered Tenney House, the cooperative house where I had lived at Smith College. There, by sharing housekeeping chores and out-of-pocket expenses for food, we had lived better than most for very little money.

In my mind’s eye I saw Air Bel as a splendid, private hotel for the right people. “Look,” I ventured, “What if we all shared the costs of rent, food, a cook, and a maid, and if we invited my clients, the Bretons and the Serges to live here, too? The Committee would pay their shares since we are supporting them anyhow. We could live like kings, have excellent company, and all that for next to nothing. I know that André Breton would love every inch of this place and so would Serge.” (Victor Serge was, as it happened, an old friend of Danny Bénédite.)
Dr. Thumin’s “very expensive” rent was 1,300 francs a month—about thirteen dollars. Some quick figuring proved that such luxury could be an undreamed-of bargain. It was decided that Danny and Theo would sign the lease, Mary Jayne would advance the money, and we would reimburse her later. Theo would also find a cook and a maid.

No time was lost. By the following weekend we had all moved in and shared our first communal meal. It was a brilliant dinner party in the great pseudo-Spanish refectory. The original members of the cooperative were Mary Jayne Gold; Theodora, Daniel, and Peterkin Bénédite, Victor Serge, his friend Laurette Séjourné, and Vladimir, his son; André Breton, Jacqueline, his wife, and Aube, their daughter; Jean Gemähling, and myself. Varian Fry was present, but only as a barely tolerated weekend guest who slept under my rabbit-fur coat. At that time, Mary Jayne did not want him as a permanent member. Later she changed her mind and he was invited shortly after I had left.

As I had predicted, Breton was enchanted with the “château,” its furnishings, and the site, finding them all perfectly surreal. Serge, likewise delighted, soon wittily renamed the place “Château Espère-Visa.” This is the establishment that later became famous as the last great gathering-place for the Surrealists under Breton’s leadership.

It is hard for me to put into words how I felt at this time without surrendering to hyperbole: I can still see myself standing on Air Bel’s terrace in the late afternoon sunshine, the great, golden leaves of the plane trees drifting down around me. I knew then that this was a moment of rare privilege. Somehow, through a strange confluence of chance encounters and unlikely coincidences, I had been swept into a place where grief, consternation, disillusionment, and anger had become the gentle servants of justice. That space had now been expanded to accommodate delight.

Our little tribe of amateurs, relying solely on brute intellect and the leadership of a reincarnated “Scarlet Pimpernel,” had been successfully outwitting Hitler’s Gestapo to save the very people Nazism most feared. This was intoxicating enough. Now, Air Bel, a country refuge and a place preserved intact from another world, promised us rest, refreshment, and the delights of good conversation at the end of the day. I was fully aware that life would probably never again offer me another such moment.
Looking out over the pool to the mountains and sea beyond, I lingered over the opening line to André Breton’s *Poisson soluble*:

"Evening at this hour spread her white hands above the magic fountain."

By now all of my own visas were in order. On the following Monday, hoping to return, but fearing that I might fail, I said goodbye to the "château" and, unable to choke back my tears, set out for Switzerland, Italy, and Yugoslavia.

Miriam Davenport Ebel in Marseille in 1997

Mary Jayne Gold  a synopsis by the author

© 1980 by Mary Jayne Gold. All rights reserved.

"Crossroads Marseilles 1940" deals with a part of my life that I remember vividly because it was so exciting. Parts of it were painful to relate but still I wanted to relive it. The book, published by Doubleday in 1980, was the result.

I am an upper middle class wasp born and raised in Chicago, Evanston and Michigan. I attended the Master's School at Dobbs Ferry, New York and a finishing school in Italy. For ten years before the war I lived in Europe, dividing my time between Paris, London and the fashionable resorts. I flew my own plane, skied all winter, visited innumerable museums and in general had a pleasant carefree time.

Then suddenly I found myself, along with several million others, on the congested roads of France, fleeing before the German Army. It caught up with me in Biarritz. I had with me a two-year-old boy, Peterkin, the son of friends, Daniel and Theo Bénédite, whom I was supposed to rescue and take to the States. This proved to be impossible without proper documents so I was obliged to return the child to his mother staying in what was
then known as the Unoccupied Zone in southern France. I continued on to Marseille where I intended to get my own papers in order and proceed to the United States.

I immediately became involved with a young deserter from the Foreign Legion. He persuaded me that I should buy a small trawler that he could sail to Gibraltar with twelve other Legionnaires, who also wished to desert and continue the fight from England. Killer, as I affectionately called my friend—he got the nickname from the way he murdered the English language—was suddenly arrested by the military police before our plan could materialize. He was held in the Fort St Nicolas in the Marseille harbor pending trial.

Miriam Davenport Ebel, Mary Jayne Gold, Raymond Couraud
Miriam Davenport Ebel, Mary Jayne Gold, Gold's gangster boyfriend, future World War II hero Raymond Couraud at dinner in Marseille in 1940

Mary Jayne Gold and Miriam Davenport Ebel
Mary Davenport Ebel (right) visits Mary Jayne Gold at the latter's villa in Gassin, France, in 1997, two months before Ms. Gold's death

Thanks to the efforts of my new friend Miriam Davenport, I next became a member of Varian Fry's American Relief Center (the Marseille operation of New York's Emergency Rescue Committee), which performed an amazing Scarlet Pimpernel operation after the fall of France. spiriting out of the country by legal or illegal means hundreds of anti-Nazi intellectual and political refugees. By a clause in the French Armistice they were now subject to extradition and death in Hitler's Europe. The collaborationist Vichy government refused to grant them exit visas in order to keep them on the shelf waiting to be picked up by the Gestapo. Among our famous "clients" were André Breton, Marc Chagall, Lion Feuchtwanger, Jacques Hadamard, Konrad Heiden, Otto Meyerhoff, Walter Mehring, Victor Serge, Franz Werfel. To the list of notabilities were added many rank and file militants who were in equal danger. All told about two thousand individuals were assisted in one way or another.

Most of the staff of the Emergency Rescue Committee including Varian and myself lived in a large Victorian villa, Air-Bel, on the outskirts of Marseilles. We ranged in age from twenty-five to early thirties. André Breton, his beautiful wife, Jacqueline and little daughter Aube soon joined us as well as the Trotskyist writer Victor Serge. The Surrealists who found themselves in the region soon flocked around Breton and on weekends we all played Surrealist games with Breton, Victor Brauner, André Masson, Wifredo Lam, Oscar Dominguez and others.

Victor Serge and his son Vladi introduced me to revolutionary Marxism, anti-Stalin brand. On the occasion of Marshal Pétain’s visit to Marseilles most of the Air-Bel contingent were picked up and held incommunicado. Serge who had done time in both bourgeois jails instructed me in the elementary principles of prison survival.
At this point, Killer surfaced. Due to his extreme youth he had received a delayed sentence and came to spend his leave with me, prior to rejoining the Foreign Legion's home base in Algeria. Instead he re-deserted and joined a Corsican gang in Marseille’s underworld. For a short while, I hoped he would work in the illegal activities of the ERC but Killer just hated all those intellectuals. I hung on to both worlds as long as I could until it became apparent that my boyfriend's underworld life would compromise the Committee, which was already having a hard time fooling the French police and the Gestapo. I was forced to withdraw from the more noble enterprise and so became a gangster’s moll of sorts. However I continued to contribute considerable sums of money to the ERC.

Killer did not think that this was the direction in which the money should flow. Urged on by Mathieu, his miniature gangland chief, he stole all my jewelry. Mathieu, after first making a declaration of love, offered to put Killer six feet underground and recover the diamonds. I knew that what he wanted was Killer's skin and 100% of the take. I firmly refused the offer. All this led to a showdown between the gangsters, Killer and myself. I sided with my now endangered boyfriend. He was overcome with remorse—and gratitude for life.

Realizing that he was now more or less washed up with me, in danger from the gang and that he would now have the civil and military police close on his heels, tipped off by the traitorous Mathieu, he decided it was time he left for England to continue the good fight, as he had intended at the outset. I found him a contact with an underground railroad through Spain. In England Killer became a British officer in the Commandos, where he belonged. He was awarded the Victoria Cross for Gallantry in battle. These were his glorious years and he always said I had given them to him.

I returned briefly to the Committee and then left for Lisbon and the United States.

After a nostalgic glimpse of pre-war Europe, "Crossroads Marseilles 1940" is an action story, with an emphasis on the personal and sometimes the humorous. I have tried to evoke those desperate heroic days, so different from the present, before the disenchantment set in. Much of the appeal, I dare say, lies in the human incidentals of an exciting experience, in a series of real events that lie just behind the facade of official history.

At any rate, 1940-41 was quite a year for a nice girl from Evanston.