

Varian Fry & Hiram Bingham IV

©2004 by Rafael Medoff & The David S. Wyman Institute for Holocaust Studies

During the weeks following the German conquest of France in June 1940, reports began reaching America about the suffering of Jews and others in France who were being targeted by the Nazis. Most Americans preferred to turn away from the news, anxious to keep “Europe’s problems” out of sight and out of mind. But a young man named Varian Fry refused to turn away.

Fry was a sophisticated New England prep school graduate who enjoyed bird watching and fine wines. He was not the sort of person one would expect to become a rescue hero. “Certainly my manner and appearance did not suggest the daredevil,” he later acknowledged. But beneath his sharply-tailored suit beat a heart filled with courage and determination.



Varian Fry
1907-1967

While stationed in Germany on a journalistic assignment in 1935, Fry had witnessed Nazi violence against local Jews. Jarred by that experience, he later became involved in the New York-based Emergency Rescue Committee, which sought

to assist European artists and intellectuals who were being targeted by the Nazis. In 1940, Fry, an author and editor with no experience in refugee relief work, volunteered for an ERC mission to France, where the Germans had installed a pro-Nazi regime with its capital in the French city of Vichy.

THINK ABOUT IT: Unusual circumstances sometimes inspire a person to do something that he might not otherwise do. Can you recall an instance in your own life when you “rose to the challenge” in a particular situation?

With \$3,000 taped to his leg to hide it from the Gestapo and a list of 200 endangered individuals, Fry undertook a mission to arrange the illegal emigration of cultural, literary, and political figures who faced arrest, and worse, at the hands of the Vichy regime.

Shortly after Fry’s arrival in August 1940, word of his work spread and refugees lined up outside his hotel room each day, pleading for help. Fry and his assistants held their “staff meetings” in the bathroom with the faucets turned on full so the noise would prevent their discussions from being overheard by any eavesdropping German police.

In one instance, the Vichy French police arrested Fry and held him on a boat for a number of days.

Because he was an American, he was released, but he knew that he was in constant danger of being re-arrested. Nevertheless, Fry was ready to clash with the authorities to save lives. When the famous artist Marc Chagall was arrested, Fry threatened a senior



Hiram Bingham IV
1903-1988

police official that he would call the *New York Times* and tell them of the arrest unless Chagall was released within half an hour. The police, fearing such a controversy, gave in.

Since the United States had not yet entered World War II, President Roosevelt’s State Department was still anxious to maintain friendly relations with Germany and was unhappy about Fry’s work, which it feared would anger the Germans and their Vichy French allies. In addition, the State Department was in charge of U.S. immigration affairs, and

was concerned that Fry's efforts would increase the pressure to permit more refugees into the United States.

Anti-foreigner and anti-Jewish prejudice was common among State Department officials during that era, and the Department worked to restrict issuing immigration visas, suppressing visa approvals far below even the small number allowed by America's strict immigration quotas. American consular officials abroad were under instructions from the State Department to "postpone and postpone and postpone" when they received requests for immigration visas from desperate Jewish refugees seeking to flee the ravages of Nazism.

But a brave U.S. vice-consul in Marseille secretly helped Fry. His name was Hiram (Harry) Bingham IV, son of a U.S. Senator and explorer upon whom Steven Spielberg based his famous movie character, Indiana Jones. Defying the State Department, Bingham provided Fry with the visas and travel documents needed to protect the refugees.

Fry and his staff smuggled the refugees from France across the Pyrenees mountains and into neighboring Spain. From Spain, where they were safe from the Gestapo, the refugees could make arrangements to travel to America or elsewhere. Altogether, Fry and Bingham helped save an estimated 2,000 people, including the artist Marc Chagall, the Nobel Prize-winning scientist Otto Meyerhof, the famous poet Franz Werfel, and the philosopher Hannah Arendt.

***THINK ABOUT IT:* What Fry and Bingham did violated French law. In your opinion, under what circumstances is it morally justified to break the law?**

Fry and Bingham also helped smuggle refugees out of prison camps where they had been interned by the

Vichy French police. In one case, Bingham arranged for the famous German Jewish novelist, Lion Feuchtwanger, to be smuggled out of an internment camp disguised in women's clothing, and he personally hid Feuchtwanger in his home until he could sneak him out of the country.

Furious German officials soon complained to the State Department about Fry's refugee-smuggling work. Anxious to avoid irritating American-German relations, the State Department transferred Bingham out of France and revoked Fry's passport, forcing him to return to the United States after thirteen months of refugee work.

Back in New York, Fry became one of the editors of a leading magazine, *The New Republic*. He used its columns to alert the American public about the plight of the Jews in Europe and to press for U.S. government action to aid the refugees.

Bingham, reassigned to Portugal and then Argentina, soon ignited a new controversy by repeatedly protesting against the Argentinean government's policy of sheltering fugitive Nazi war criminals. Once again, the State Department was furious with him, this time because it feared Bingham was endangering America's relations with Argentina. Bingham was punished by the State Department—he was barred from ever advancing to the rank of ambassador.

Varian Fry and Hiram Bingham IV undertook great risks, to their personal welfare and to their careers, for the sake of a higher goal: saving lives.

***THINK ABOUT IT:* Some would say a true hero is one who sacrifices his own interests in order to help others who are in need. Can you name other individuals whose work should earn them the title "hero"?**

The David S. Wyman Institute for Holocaust Studies

On the campus of Gratz College
7605 Old York Road - Melrose Park, PA 19027
Tel: (215) 635-5622 - Fax: (215) 635-5644
www.WymanInstitute.org