

Gallery to honor man who rescued Jewish artists



Bella Chagall Meyer, granddaughter of Marc Chagall, will attend the gala in honor of Varian Fry on Sunday in Palm Beach.

By CHARLES PASSY
Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

He's often called the "artists' Schindler," a man responsible for saving hundreds of prominent Jewish painters, writers and thinkers during the Holocaust.

So why doesn't the world know more about Varian Fry?

It's a wrong that many organizations are now trying to right, including the Pennsylvania-based David S. Wyman Institute for Holocaust Studies, which will host a gala event at the Wally Findlay Galleries in Palm

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BENYAMIN KORN
Associate director, Wyman Institute

Beach on Sunday evening to honor Fry. The fund-raiser is tied to a show, *Jewish Painters of the School of Paris*, which will run at the Worth Avenue gallery through April 30.

The connection? Among the 14 painters whose work will be featured is the re-

nowned Marc Chagall, who was rescued by Fry in 1941.

Fry "was the one who risked his life for all these big names," says Bella Chagall Meyer, the late painter's granddaughter. Chagall Meyer will be on hand for Sunday's event.

A Harvard-trained scholar and journalist who traveled to Europe, Fry, who was not Jewish, emerged as the leader of an American rescue movement a few years after being a firsthand witness to Nazi violence against the Jews. He had no training as a diplomat or relief worker but was convinced that something had to be done to help the Jews. He was also frustrated that the American government was not heeding the call.

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inferno and started throwing buckets of water," says Benjamin Korn, associate director of the Wyman Institute, which focuses on the American reaction to the Holocaust.

Fry concentrated on Jewish artists, particularly those trapped in Nazi-occupied France, for a simple reason. There were "many writers and artists whose work I had enjoyed. . . . Now that they were in danger, I felt obliged to them if I could," Fry later noted.

Fry had to work around Nazi officials, who were determined not to let Jews leave. He "set up secret routes, changed money on the black market, conspired with gangsters, forged documents, chartered ships that sailed illegally," according to a report by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C.

Fry saved more than 1,500 people from 1940 to 1941. (He was forced to depart Europe after his U.S. passport expired and French authorities expelled him.)

With Chagall, Fry faced a



Varian Fry (left), in a 1941 photo with Hiram Bingham (far right), a U.S. diplomat in France, and the artist Marc Chagall and his wife, Bella, at the Chagalls' home in France as they planned the Chagalls' escape.

particular obstacle: The artist loved France so much that he didn't want to leave.

"My grandfather was quite oblivious to the danger they were in," Chagall Meyer says.

But Fry convinced Chagall and his wife, Bella, to go and then arranged for the couple's escape from Marseille to Spain to the United States. At one point, Chagall was arrested. Fry got him out of prison by

threatening to notify the American press.

After he returned to America, Fry led a quiet life, teaching and working as an editor and businessman. He wrote a book, *Surrender on Demand*, about his experience as a rescuer and spoke out about the Nazi atrocities. But as the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum has noted, "People wanted to put the horrors of the war and the Holocaust behind them."

Fry died in 1967, his work having gone largely unrecognized.

But in recent years, there has been a growing effort to honor Fry. His story has been the subject of a TV movie, *Varian's War*, starring William Hurt, and a documentary, *Varian Fry: The Artists' Schindler*. The U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum also created an exhibition about him.

The Palm Beach gallery show and gala event came about through a series of connections: Benjamin Korn is the son of Rita Stein, a prominent local cultural philanthropist. In turn, Stein is a friend of James Borynack, chairman of the Findlay Galleries. Together, they decided to find a way to pay tribute to Fry and raise money for the Wyman Institute.

Korn says such recognition for Fry is long overdue. "He was one of the heroes of the rescue movement," he says.

For information about the Wally Findlay Galleries show or the Sunday gala that honors Varian Fry, call the gallery at (561) 655-2090.

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