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A State Department Historian Rewrites its Holocaust Record

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U.S. consular officials in Vichy France (Marseille) who rejected Jewish visa applicants in the 1940s were not really so bad, and a dissident consul who saved refugees from the Nazis really did not do as much people think--so says an official State Department historian, in a new attempt to rewrite the history of the department's response to the Holocaust.

Melissa Jane Taylor, who is on the staff of the State Department's Office of the Historian, makes these surprising allegations in an essay in a recent issue (Vol.30, No.2) of *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, which is published by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

A careful review of Dr. Taylor's essay, "American Consuls and the Politics of Rescue in Marseille, 1936-1941," reveals that her claims are in many cases based on a misreading of documents and a failure to consult all of the relevant sources.

I. MISREADING DOCUMENTS

Dr. Taylor repeatedly characterizes the consular officials in Marseille as "sympathetic" to the refugees and the rescuers. Yet her "evidence" often consists of blatantly self-serving statements by officials who did not want to appear hardhearted. Such proclamations of "sympathy" should not be taken at face value--especially when they are made by individuals who were closing America's doors to refugees at the very moment they were expressing "sympathy." Some examples:

1. Taylor claims (p.251) that Freeman Matthews, a U.S. consul in Vichy, was "sympathetic" to rescue activists Varian Fry and Frank Bohn, and that Matthews was "reluctant" to report on Fry and Bohn to the State Department. Yet on the very same page, she acknowledges that Matthews reported to the State Department that Fry and Bohn were engaged in "illegal" activities that could cause "a public scandal." Matthews' action led to the Roosevelt administration's active interference in the Fry rescue mission.

2. Taylor asserts (p.267) that William Peck and other U.S. consuls in Marseille "in many instances...expressed sympathy for Varian Fry and Dr. Frank Bohn's work, or for the refugees themselves." Yet elsewhere (p.254) she mentions a memo in which Peck wrote: "I deplore as much as anyone the influx into the United States of certain refugee elements..."

Taylor tries to soften Peck's remark by insisting that Peck "seemed to have had, for the time, a reasoned interpretation of policy even if he was not especially keen on having refugees immigrate to the United States." Taylor's phrase "not especially keen" is a remarkably gentle characterization of Peck's statement that he "deplored" an "influx" of refugees.

Taylor fails to report a different Peck memo which is extremely revealing. In the other memo, Peck wrote that he was open to immigration by "aged people," since "the old people will not reproduce and can do our country no harm..." Peck then justified rejecting applications by other refugees, on the grounds that "The young ones may be suffering, but the history of their race shows that suffering does not kill many of them."¹ Taylor does not inform her readers of this callous anti-Semitic remark by Peck. (On the contrary, Taylor praises him [on p.255] for supposedly being "not overly restrictionist.")

3. Taylor cites a statement (p.252) by the Consul General in Marseille, Hugh Fullerton, in which he lambasted Fry's rescue activity, while insisting "I personally sympathized with the plight of the unfortunate refugees..." According to Taylor, "Fullerton's expressions of sympathy demonstrate that consuls were cognizant of the Jewish plight. Unfortunately, their varied response remain under studied." Dr. Taylor seems to be unaware of the many examples of Roosevelt administration officials declaring their "sympathy" even as they undermined rescue efforts. To cite just a few:

--- Secretary of State Cordell Hull, in his September 18, 1940 telegram ordering the U.S. embassy in France to block the Fry rescue mission (cited by Taylor on p.251), began by declaring: "Department is sympathetic with the plight of unfortunate refugees."

--- Assistant Secretary of State Breckinridge Long, the most notorious opponent of Jewish refugee immigration (and a documented anti-Semite), testified before the U.S. House of Representatives that "the Jewish people [in Europe] are entitled to every encouragement and expression of sympathy"--even as he urged Congress to reject a resolution promoting rescue.²

--- President Franklin D. Roosevelt himself, in declaring the Virgin Islands off-limits to Jewish refugees, began his rejection order by saying, "I have every sympathy [for] the hundreds of thousands of foreign refugees..."³

II. WHITEWASHING THE ROOSEVELT ADMINISTRATION'S OBSTRUCTION OF RESCUE

1. Dr. Taylor fails to acknowledge that Frank Bohn, a U.S. labor activist who assisted Fry, was forced out of France by the Roosevelt administration. Fry, in his memoir *Surrender on Demand*, reported that as a result of the aforementioned telegram from Secretary Hull, "Bohn and I [were] summoned to the Consulate every day to be asked when we were planning to leave France...Bohn succumbed to the pressure" and returned to the United States. (p.92)

¹ Peter Eisner, "Saving the Jews of Nazi France," *The Smithsonian*, March 2009.

² Long's testimony of November 23, 1943 is found on p.182 of the congressional transcript.

³ FDR to Ickes, December, 18, 1940.

2. Taylor fails to acknowledge that Fry, too, was forced out of France by the Roosevelt administration. In his memoir, Fry describes how the U.S. Consulate in Marseille informed him that it had been ordered by the State Department to refuse to renew his expired passport unless he agreed to leave France—thereby enabling the Vichy regime to expel him.⁴

3. Having failed to acknowledge the pattern of the Roosevelt administration forcing the rescue activists out of France, Taylor proceeds to provide an incomplete and misleading description of the administration's transfer from France of Hiram Bingham IV, a dissident consul in Marseille who aided Fry.

Taylor challenges the notion that Bingham's transfer to Lisbon was intended to halt his efforts to aid refugees. She claims (p.262) "there is no evidence that the Department knew of those actions or had any particular desire to rid itself." Here are the facts regarding the transfer, some of which Taylor mentions but distorts, and some of which she entirely omits:

— The State Department gave no explanation for his transfer. So Dr. Taylor would have us believe that precisely at the moment that the administration was cracking down on Fry, by pure coincidence there was some urgent (yet unarticulated) need to have Bingham working in Lisbon instead of Marseille.

— The official transfer order stated that the transfer of Bingham was "not made at his request." Taylor claims this was standard language in transfers and therefore is insignificant with regard the reason for Bingham's transfer. But it is also a fact that Bingham did not seek to be transferred. Fry himself wrote in his journal on May 7, 1941: "Harry Bingham told me this morning that he has just received instructions to go to Lisbon...I hate to think what it is going to be like here after he has gone."⁵ That certainly does not sound like someone who wanted or expected to be transferred out of France.

— An entry in Bingham's journal, which Taylor acknowledges, reads: "Why was I transferred to Lisbon. Attitude toward Jews—me in visa section...attitude toward Fry." If Taylor wants to claim that Bingham was mistaken, that is her prerogative; but she cannot say there is "no evidence" that he was transferred because of his refugee work.

— Contrary to Taylor's portrayal, the State Department did know of Bingham's special and unusual interest in the plight of the Jewish refugees. On December 20, 1940, Consul General Fullerton sent the State Department a detailed report compiled by Bingham—with maps—concerning five Vichy detention camps where Jews and others were being held.⁶

Fullerton, dissociating himself from Bingham's strong interest in the plight of the Jews, emphasized in his cover note that "Mr. Bingham's trip to the camps was in nowise official...It was, in fact, made at his own expense." Taylor mentions Bingham's report (p.260), but misses its significance; she fails to realize that it shows State was aware of Bingham's exceptional interest in Jewish refugees--thus contradicting one of the central claims of Taylor's essay.

— A Unitarian rescue activist in Vichy France, Robert Dexter, naively sent the State Department a letter praising Bingham for his assistance on refugee matters. Assistant Secretary of Breckinridge Long, who received Dexter's letter, was obsessed with Jewish refugees; it seems

⁴ Varian Fry, *Surrender on Demand* (Boulder, CO: Johnson Books, 1997), pp.219-220.

⁵ This appears on p.534 of the original manuscript of Fry's book, at the Columbia University library.

⁶ Eisner, op.cit.

highly unlikely that he would not have noticed Bingham was doing something he staunchly opposed. Taylor (p.262) mentions the Dexter letter, but completely misses its significance.

— Even at the time, some people in Marseille believed Bingham had been pushed out in order to obstruct his work. Hans L. Schlesinger, a refugee who was trying to secure a visa in 1941, was helped by Bingham but then returned to the consulate another time to find that Bingham was gone. He later recalled that at the time, he "heard a rumor that [Bingham] had been relieved of his office since he had apparently ignored the U.S. State Department's suggestion to keep the number of U.S.-bound immigrants as low as possible."⁷ While Schlesinger's disclosure is no smoking gun, Taylor should have acknowledged it along with the other evidence on this issue.

— Dr. Taylor herself offers no plausible explanation for Bingham's transfer. She reads between the lines of a Fullerton memo to speculate that Fullerton "implied" that Bingham "did not enjoy" working in the consulate's visa section. (p.260) Yet we know that Bingham wanted to be in the visa section, so that he could issue visas to refugees. Moreover, if Bingham was merely unhappy with visa work, he could have moved to another section of the consulate; he did not have to be sent out of the country.

III. FAILURE TO UTILIZE ALL APPROPRIATE SOURCES

Dr. Taylor's endnotes indicate that she did not interview any members of the Fry, Bohn, or Bingham families, or the families of any other members of their rescue network. She suggests (n.37) that she contacted one Bingham family member and was informed that Bingham's papers were "unavailable." But she failed to explain that many of the Bingham documents in fact can be found at the family's website, www.hirambinghamrescuer.org.

Taylor seems to be unaware of the important episode in the Bingham story that was published by the David S. Wyman Institute for Holocaust Studies in 2006 and is easily accessible on the internet. In a newly-discovered postwar interview (with his granddaughter), Bingham said Fullerton "didn't want to give any visas to these Jewish people...I was getting as many visas as I could to as many people...I had to do as much as I could."

When a number of British pilots who escaped from the Germans were detained by the Vichy French, Fullerton sent Bingham to the [French] internment camp to lobby against their release. "We were not supposed to help them at all," Bingham recalled in the interview. "The Consul General told me to tell the French manager, the general in charge of the camp, that we were not interested, that we were glad they were holding them so they couldn't get back to England." But when Bingham arrived, the general assumed he had come to ask for the British pilots' freedom, so he immediately offered to let them "escape," even before Bingham raised the issue. The Fry network then smuggled the pilots out of France.⁸

One would have thought this telling episode would have merited at least a passing mention in Taylor's essay, since it says much about the relationship between Fullerton and Bingham, upon which Taylor bases much of her thesis.

⁷ *Valley News*, West Lebanon, NH, 22 June 2006 (easily accessible on the Bingham family's website, hirambinghamrescuer.org)

⁸ Wyman Institute press release, May 25, 2006.

IV. INNUENDO AND STRAW MEN

Dr. Taylor's essay attempts to diminish Bingham through innuendo and the use of straw men. Some examples:

1. Taylor refers to a letter from refugee Thomas Mann praising Bingham. She then writes (p.262): "But one letter is insufficient to support an overall appraisal of Bingham as anything more than a sympathetic consul." This is a straw man; historians who have written about Bingham's efforts do not cite only Mann's letter. There is ample additional evidence that Bingham helped save lives. One striking piece of evidence--which for some reason was ignored by Taylor--is Fry's by-now well known inscription on the copy of his book that he gave to Bingham: "To my partner in the 'crime' of saving human lives."

2. Taylor writes (p.262): "Without a doubt, Bingham aided in the escape of Jews and refugees (though it remains unclear how many)..." Taylor's parenthetical comment has the effect of diminishing Bingham's achievements. The numbers commonly cited with regard to other dissident diplomats are likewise "unclear," yet nobody uses that fact to implicitly minimize the rescuer's work. The Sousa Mendes Foundation, for example, reports that Portuguese consul Aristides de Sousa Mendes gave visas to 10,000 Jews; according to Sugihara House, Japanese consul Chiune Sugihara aided "approximately 6,000 people." Is it fair for any historian to expect such numbers can be determined with precision, given the historical circumstances?

3. Taylor (p.263) insinuates that Bingham's role in the rescue of Lion Feuchtwanger has been exaggerated. She says Bingham did not drive the getaway car, but only hid Feuchtwanger in his house. Since either act--the escape and the sheltering--meant Bingham risked his job and his career, why does it matter if he was in the car or not? Why gratuitously diminish Bingham's reputation in this manner?

4. Taylor (p.251) justifies the decision by consul Freeman Matthews to inform the State Department about Fry and Bohn. She asserts that "while Matthews and other consular officials were sympathetic, they could not break American law..." This is a straw man; nobody was asking Matthews to break American law. The question was whether Matthews should have gone out of his way to cast aspersions on the rescue activists.

5. Taylor claims (p. 262) that "the personnel records of Hurley, Fullerton, Standish, and Peck present consuls who were less cool toward the plight of the refugees than previously assumed." This is a straw man. She does not name anybody who supposedly "assumes" that these particular consuls were "cool" toward the Jews; nor has she proven that they were "less cool" than alleged.

6. Taylor contends (p.249) that "An examination of the consulate in Marseille shows that consuls did not always support the restrictionist policies advocated by the Department of State, and did not always implement them." This is a straw man. Nobody claims that every consular official in every consulate gave 100% support to the State Department's policies and implemented them 100% of the time. Certainly there were exceptions, but unfortunately they were few and far between. Taylor has not provided persuasive evidence that the consuls in Marseille (aside from Bingham and his ally Myles Standish) were exceptions. The fact that the U.S. immigration quota for French nationals was never filled during the Holocaust years indicates that U.S. consuls in France were going out of their way to turn down applicants. More than 8,000 French quota places sat unfilled between 1941 and 1944.

7. Taylor concludes (p. 262) that her research shows "Bingham seems less unlike his colleagues than people have portrayed him." This assertion is without merit. Bingham was as different from his colleagues as night is from day. (We are leaving Myles Standish out of this discussion, since Taylor is obviously not referring to him in this context.) Bingham risked his job and his career to rescue Jews; his colleagues did not. At his own initiative and expense, Bingham entered French detention camps to document the plight of the Jews; his colleagues did no such thing. Bingham was hailed by Fry as his "partner" in "saving human lives"; Fry said the opposite about Bingham's colleagues. The journals and correspondence of numerous refugees attest to Bingham's extraordinary efforts to help them; they offer no such accolades concerning Bingham's colleagues.

V. CONCLUSION

In recent years, a handful of authors have attempted to revise the history of the Roosevelt administration's response to the Holocaust. Dr. Taylor's essay should be considered in this broader context.

When an interviewer recently asked Dr. Taylor to name a book that she would recommend to fellow historians, she chose *FDR and the Jews*, a celebratory depiction of Roosevelt as the "rescuer" of millions of Jews (because he led America in World War II against the Nazis). The book was authored by the editor of Holocaust and Genocide Studies, Richard Breitman, along with Allan J. Lichtman.

Taylor's choice of that book was ironic, in view of the book's treatment of Fry and Bingham. 'FDR and the Jews' omitted any mention of Fry, Bingham, their comrades, or their rescue activities. It is not clear why a book purporting to be a comprehensive study of President Roosevelt's response to the Holocaust did not include any reference to the one instance in which Americans went to Europe to rescue Jews.

Dr. Taylor said 'FDR and the Jews' "provides deeper understandings" and "challenges us to reexamine what we thought we already knew."⁹ It is difficult to see how a book that ignores Fry could help us more deeply understand Fry, or would cause us to reexamine what we thought we knew about the Fry mission. Breitman and Lichtman have declined to respond to multiple inquiries asking the reason for the omission.¹⁰

Prof. Breitman is the best known representative of a small but prolific school of Roosevelt revisionists. They include a few historians who have worked in Holocaust studies, a few who have not, and an assortment of pundits whose published comments on the topic have offered a range of colorful perspectives.

A few samples illustrate the flavor of this school's positions. Divorce lawyer Robert Rosen, in *Saving the Jews*, contends that criticism of Roosevelt's response to the Holocaust is "anti-American."¹¹ Former French history instructor and archivist James H. Kitchens has argued that a U.S. bombing of the Auschwitz gas chambers would have violated

⁹ <http://blog.historians.org/2015/09/member-spotlight-melissa-jane-taylor/>

¹⁰ Medoff to Breitman and Lichtman, Nov. 11, 13, and 20, 2013.

¹¹ Robert N. Rosen, *Saving the Jews: Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Holocaust* (New York: Thunder's Mouth, 2006), p.332.

international law.¹² FDR memorabilia collector Richard Garfunkel derides scholars who are critical of FDR's refugee policy as "Holocaust exploiters."¹³ Former State Department official Frank Brecher, in *Reluctant Ally*, claimed that many historians who have criticized FDR's Holocaust record are motivated by a common "personal background" that causes them to be suspicious of Christians.¹⁴ According to William Rubinstein, in *The Myth of Rescue*, "Not one plan or proposal, made anywhere in the democracies [during the Holocaust] could have rescued one single Jew who perished..."¹⁵ The aforementioned Allan Lichtman claims that historians who question Roosevelt's Holocaust record are conspiring to "create an excuse for Israel" to "attack Iran."¹⁶

For this school of partisans, the Fry-Bingham episode is especially problematic. It cannot be claimed that President Roosevelt or his administration were unaware of Fry's mission; they were fully aware of it. It cannot be argued that the Roosevelt administration did not interfere with the rescue operation; the administration was directly responsible for ending the operation. Perhaps the partisans' only remaining avenue of argument is to claim that the rescuers were in France were not really so heroic or successful after all. In that context, perhaps defenders of FDR's Holocaust record will find Melissa Jane Taylor's attempt to diminish Hiram Bingham IV helpful to their cause. But her essay does not advance the cause of responsible historical scholarship.

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¹² *American Jewish History* 85:1 (1997), p.106.

¹³ <http://www.richardjgarfunkel.com/2009/06/16/the-bombing-of-auschwitz-and-the-jewish-reaction-to-the-holocaust-june-162009/>

¹⁴ Frank W. Brecher, *Reluctant Ally: United States Foreign Policy Toward the Jews from Wilson to Roosevelt* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1991), p.100.

¹⁵ William D. Rubinstein, *The Myth of Rescue* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), p.84.

¹⁶ *Jerusalem Post*, March 11, 2014.