

SAVING JEWS FROM THE NAZIS



Varian Fry knew trouble was coming. Adolf Hitler and his Nazi party had taken control of Germany in 1933. Now they had begun a brutal campaign of persecuting the Jews. Fry saw this for himself when he was visiting Germany in 1935. Again and again, Fry, a writer from New York City, saw how the Nazis went after Jews. He saw bloody riots staged against them. Once he saw a Nazi soldier pin an old Jewish man's hand to a table with a knife. Then the Nazi pulled out the knife and walked away, laughing. After that, Fry, who was not a Jew, decided that he would fight to save Jews from Nazi horror if he ever had the chance.

2 That chance came in 1940, one year after World War II broke out. By then, the Nazis had conquered France. They ordered French officials to "surrender on demand" any Jew or Nazi enemy. Such people were to be turned over to the Nazi police, called the Gestapo.

3 At this time, the U.S. was still at peace. It did not join the war until the end of 1941. Still, many Americans wanted to

A sidewalk café in Marseilles, France, around the time Varian Fry was there helping writers and artists escape from the Nazis

help those trapped by the Nazis. Some of them formed the Emergency Rescue Committee. Its main goal was to get Jewish artists and writers out of France. The committee needed someone to go to France to oversee this effort. The person would risk arrest, torture, and maybe death. Fry had no training for this kind of rescue work. Nonetheless, he volunteered to go. He later wrote, "...I could not remain idle so long as I had the chance at all of saving even a few of [Nazi Germany's] intended victims."

⁴ Fry was an unlikely hero. He had never done anything brave in his life. He certainly didn't look heroic. Fry was a thin 32-year-old who suffered from ulcers. He was a bookworm and a bird watcher. "All I [knew] about trying to outsmart the Gestapo," he wrote, "[was] what I'd seen in the movies."

⁵ Still, in August of 1940, Fry flew to the French port city of Marseilles. He had with him a list of 200 specific people he would try to save. He had exit visas to get each of them out of France. He also had \$3,000 wrapped around his legs. Fry had planned on staying for just three weeks. But the rescue effort proved so demanding and the need was so great, he stayed for 13 months. "I stayed because the refugees needed me," he later explained. "But it

took courage, and courage [was] a quality I hadn't previously been sure I possessed."

⁶ Fry set up his office in a local hotel. By day, he ran a simple—and legal—relief agency. His American Relief Center helped people get food, money, and visas. At night, however, Fry did his real work.

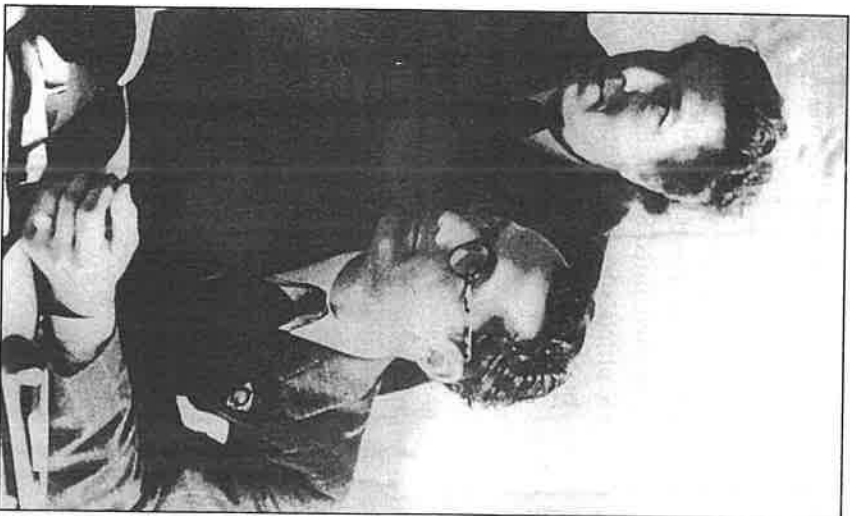
With the help of a complex network, he arranged the escape of the 200 people on his list. He also helped nearly 2,000 others flee the Nazis.

⁷ It was hard to get out of Marseilles in 1940. All exit terminals were watched by the police. With the right papers, some of Fry's "clients" managed to leave by train or boat. Most, however, had to sneak out of France. Often they had to be disguised as farm laborers. They carried their possessions in lunch boxes and climbed a secret escape route over the Pyrénées Mountains and into Spain.

⁸ Fry not only saved people, but he also saved great works of art. Some of these pieces he smuggled out of the country himself. He once took 12 suitcases by train across the border to Spain. In the suitcases was the original score of Anton Bruckner's Third Symphony.

⁹ Fry, of course, was putting his life on the line. As a citizen of the neutral United States, he had little to fear if he followed Nazi rules. But he didn't follow them.

Night after night he broke the law to aid his refugees. He met with a cartoonist from Vienna who agreed to forge I.D. cards. He raised money on the black market. He kept a map of his secret escape



Varian Fry (seated) with artist Andre Breton in Marseilles, France, 1940


routes pinned to the wall behind a mirror in his hotel room.

¹⁰ The police suspected Varian Fry was up to something. They watched him closely. A few times they even brought him in for questioning. So Fry had to be careful. He masked conversations he had in his hotel room by running water in the sink. He got rid of secret papers by burning them in train station bathrooms. He even stuffed secret messages into hollowed-out toothpaste tubes.

¹¹ At last, in September 1941, Varian Fry was ordered out of France. He was labeled an "undesirable alien." When he asked the police why they were kicking him out, one of them said, "Because you have protected Jews and anti-Nazis."

¹² Back in the United States, Fry tried to alert U.S. officials to the plight of the Jews under the Nazis. But few people listened to him. Miriam Davenport, who worked with Fry in France, explained why. She said, "We were still pretty anti-Semitic in this country at that time. A lot of people just didn't want to hear his story."

¹³ Varian Fry died in 1967. At the time he was teaching Latin at a school in

Connecticut. Shortly before he died, the French gave him a Legion of Honor award. Later, in 1991, the U.S. honored him with the Eisenhower Liberation Medal. But his greatest tribute came from the Jews themselves. Israel named him "Righteous Among the Nations." This award is given to non-Jews who risked their lives to save Jews. Varian Fry was the first American to win it. As Susan Goodman, the curator of the Jewish Museum in New York, said, "His story shows any person can be a hero." 

If you have been timed while reading this article, enter your reading time below. Then turn to the Words-per-Minute Table on page 71 and look up your reading speed (words per minute). Enter your reading speed on the graph on page 72.

Reading Time: Lesson 7

_____ Minutes _____ Seconds

Problem and Solution

"SAVING JEWS FROM THE NAZIS"

Name#:

Block:

Directions: *Read the following story and record the different problems and solutions presented in the passage. Also, there may be additional questions that follow a problem and solution, so be sure to answer those as well, COMPLETELY and in complete sentences.*

1. Problem:

Solution: Fry would fight to save Jews from Nazi horror if he ever had a chance.

2. Problem: Americans wanted to help Jewish artists and writers, trapped by the Nazis, out of France.

Solution:

3. Problem:

Solution: Varian smuggled art pieces in suitcases by train across the border to Spain.

4. Problem: Varian needed to find ways to aid the refugees' escape each night.

Solution:

5. Problem: Refugees needed to sneak out of France.

Solution:

6. Problem: The police wanted to stop Varian from protecting Jews

Solution:

7. Question: What opinions do you have to the police's solution to #6's problem? **Elaborate and explain your opinion in detail.**

8. Problem:

Solution: Varian masked conversations in his hotel room by running water in a sink, burned secret papers in train station bathrooms, stuffed secret messages into hollowed-out toothpaste tubes.

9. Problem:

Solution: Varian alerted U.S. officials to the Jews' struggles.

10. Question: Did Varian's solution to #9's problem work? **Explain your answer by telling why it did or did not work.**

11. What was **the cause** of Varian being named "Righteous Among the Nations"?

12. Would it be accurate to infer that Varian Fry had always been a plucky, or intrepid person **AND** tried to save the helpless? Use evidence from the text to support your answer **AND** explain how each quote/piece of evidence supports your answer. Don't forget to cite the page number from where you found each piece of evidence.

****HINT**** You will need more than one quote to fully support your answer since.