

NEW JERSEY Jewish Standard

Varian Fry exhibit coming to Ramapo College 'Ridgewood's hometown hero' saved thousands from Nazis

_JStandardCatherine Taub | Local | World |

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The Ridgewood Herald issue dated July 12, 1917, reported that Varian Fry (age 9) and his patriotic friends held a lavish bazaar — with ice cream and candy booths, a cake table, a vaudeville show, and games of chance — that amassed \$9.05 for the benefit of the Red Cross and the “Great Cause” of World War I.

First Person

Later in his life, as Jewish Standard readers may know, Fry went on to save more than 2,000 people — including some of the greatest artists and thinkers of the time — from the Nazis.

Ramapo College in Mahwah has arranged with the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington to host the final exhibit of Assignment Rescue: The Story of Varian Fry and the Emergency Rescue Committee. (The exhibit, curated by the museum, has been traveling around the country.) It will be held at the college's Pascal Gallery at the Berrie Center for Performing and Visual Arts from Sept. 1 to Oct. 8.

'An angel from America'



Varian Fry walking along the street in Marseille in 1941. Courtesy Annette Fry

By the time France fell to the Nazis in June of 1940, the popular response to news of anti-Semitism had become, “Don't get involved.” Taking matters into their own hands, a group of people met at the Commodore Hotel in New York City to form the Emergency Rescue Committee. Among those present were Alfred Barr (director of the new Museum of Modern Art), Erika Mann (daughter of the exiled novelist Thomas Mann), religious leaders, and Varian Fry, a journalist. They collected more than \$3,000 and created a list of 200 names to be saved from certain death. The list included politicians, artists, writers, scientists, and musicians, including Marc Chagall, Max Ernst, Hannah Arendt, Otto Meyerhoff, Lion Feuchtwanger, Heinrich Mann, Andre Breton, Franz and Alma Mahler Werfel, and Jacques Lipchitz.

Varian Fry, who spoke six languages, volunteered to bring the money to France and get the people on the list out of it.

After checking into the Hotel Splendide in the port city of Marseille, he wondered how he would find the exiles. Instead, they found him, describing him as “an angel from America who has come to rescue us.” He soon realized that he would need to conspire with a clandestine group to forge official documents, exchange currency on the black market, and assist in the escape routes for what became (after 13 months) more than 2,000 trapped refugees.

Not all the refugees were celebrities. The Jewish Standard has reported the stories of Jeanette Berman and her parents as well

as of the late Isi and Frida Canner, all of Bergen County. While signing her biography of Fry, "In Defiance of Hitler," at the USHMM, Carla McClafferty met Margit Meissner, who together with her mother was rescued by Fry. Gys Landsberger of Connecticut tells how Fry and the ERC directly rescued her in-laws and indirectly her and her husband. There are surely hundreds of similar, unrecorded accounts. Felix Rohatyn and his family were also rescued by Fry. In recognition, Ambassador Rohatyn participated in the renaming of a square near the American consulate in Marseille "Place Varian Fry."

Most recognition after death

Though the political, intellectual, and artistic refugees Fry helped to save went on to significantly contribute to the culture of America, his efforts were not sanctioned by the United States. In fact, in September 1941, Fry's passport was rescinded and he was forced to return —having acquired an FBI file for "protecting Jews and anti-Nazis."

He could not resume his career as a journalist or be employed by the government. Fry, his widow Annette, and three children would come to pay the price for his choice to act against indifference, suffering financial and emotional consequences. His only official recognition before his death in 1967, at age 59, came from France, when he was awarded the Croix de Chevalier de la Legion d'Honneur.

In 1991, the United States Holocaust Memorial Council awarded him the Eisenhower Liberation Medal, posthumously.

The 1993 inaugural exhibition of the USHMM was ASSIGNMENT: RESCUE.

In February 1996 Yad Vashem posthumously honored Varian Fry as the first American "Righteous Among the Nations." At present, more than 22,000 people worldwide have been awarded this designation. Only three are Americans.

Rescuing a hero from obscurity

I saw Assignment: Rescue at The Jewish Museum in Manhattan in 1997. It seemed impossible that our history books did not describe this American hero and the Emergency Rescue Committee's mission.

What a great story! Within a month I read in a local paper that Fry, who was born in New York City on Oct. 15, 1907, actually grew up in Ridgewood, moving there with his parents, Arthur and Lillian Fry, in 1910. He attended the Monroe Street School and the Frys were members of West Side Presbyterian Church.

In November 2001 the Ridgewood Library hosted the traveling exhibit that is shortly to be shown at Ramapo College. More than 7,000 community members (including busloads of students) saw the exhibit and attended the programs.

A Varian Fry Humanitarian Scholarship was established at Ridgewood High School and has been awarded to 11 extraordinary graduates.

A Ridgewood street was dedicated as Varian Fry Way in 2005.

While celebrations of the 100th anniversary of Varian Fry's birth were held in Marseille, Paris, and Berlin, according to Annette Fry, Ridgewood was "the only state in the union" to honor him. Perhaps this explains Annette Fry's donations to the Ridgewood Library of a copy of the original manuscript for her husband's autobiography "Surrender on Demand" and the beautifully framed certificate designating Varian Fry as one Righteous Among the Nations.

The Jewish Standard and the David S. Wyman Institute for Holocaust Studies created a petition proposing Varian Fry be recognized by a postage stamp. Rep. Steve Rothman (D-9) sponsored Congressional Resolution 89 for the issuance of the stamp (2006). The Ridgewood Library has submitted hundreds of signatures to the Postal Advisory Council and has received the same response, "Varian Fry is under consideration."

On Oct. 9, 2007, the Postal Service and Ridgewood's Acting Postmaster Mary Ellen Murray unveiled what's called a "pictorial cancellation" in his honor. A special postmark, it read: "Varian Fry — Celebrating 100 years of his birth, October 15, 1907 to '007, Ridgewood Holocaust Hero, Ridgewood Station New Jersey 07450."

Events in connection with the exhibit

According to Michael Riff, the director of the Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies at Ramapo College, who made arrangements for the exhibit, the International Rescue Committee (formerly the ERC) will supply a limited number of kits that include a video and lesson plans for teachers bringing students.

The opening reception will be held on Wednesday, Sept. 15, at 6 p.m. and will feature Mordecai Paldiel, former head of the Righteous at Yad Vashem, who nominated Varian Fry to be named among the "Righteous."

On Monday, Sept. 27, at 7:15 p.m., Rosemary Sullivan will present "Lives on the Line: Varian Fry and the Artists He Saved at the Villa Air-Bel."

On Monday, Oct. 4, at 7:15 p.m., Sheila Isenberg, author and professor of English at Marist College, will present "The Intellectual as Hero: Varian Fry and his Feat of Rescue." Both of these programs will be held at the York Room of the Birch Mansion at Ramapo.

Jacques Lipchitz famously described Varian Fry as a racehorse hitched to a wagonload of stones. When U.S. Secretary of State Warren Christopher assisted James Fry (Varian's son) in the planting of a tree on the Avenue of the Righteous leading to the Yad Vashem Museum, he used the occasion to apologize on behalf of the State Department for the treatment Fry received

during his time in France. The State Department was the load of stones preventing Varian's rescue mission. What is the wagonload of stones today holding back vindication of Varian Fry's honor by expunging his FBI file? We have the opportunity and obligation to pay tribute to Varian Fry while Annette Fry is alive by issuing a postage stamp and dedicating an appropriate street in New York City. It's time.

Editor's note: Though Catherine Taub does not say so, she is largely responsible for bringing "Ridgewood's hometown hero" to local attention and beyond.