

## The David S. Wyman Institute for Holocaust Studies

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# The Rescue of Marc Chagall

During the weeks following the German conquest of France in June 1940, thousands of refugees, many of them Jews, fled to southern France to avoid capture by the Nazis. Among the refugees were many prominent political dissidents, intellectuals,



Varian Fry, Marc Chagall, Bella Chagall and Hiram Bingham IV, at the Chagalls' home in Gordes, in March 1941, the weekend they planned the Chagalls' escape from Vichy France.

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writers, and artists. On June 22, Marshal Petain's Vichy regime signed an agreement with the Nazis, agreeing to "surrender on demand" anyone whom the Germans were pursuing.

Three days later, in New York City, American friends and colleagues of the refugees met to establish the Emergency Rescue Committee. They hoped to bring the most prominent cultural figures among the refugees to the United States—a tall order, given the prevailing anti-immigration mood among the American public, Congress, and the Roosevelt administration.

Not only did the administration oppose liberalizing America's tight immigration quotas, but the State Department set up bureaucratic obstacles to avoid granting most of the immigration visas that the law still permitted. Assistant Secretary of State Breckinridge Long instructed American consular officials to "postpone and postpone and postpone" approving visa applications from Jewish refugees.

As a result, during the Hitler years, 1933-1945, only 35.8 percent of the German-Austrian quota was filled. Nearly 200,000 quota places from Axis-ruled

countries were unfilled—nearly 200,000 lives that could have been saved.

With help from First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, the Emergency Rescue Committee secured the administration's reluctant agreement to provide emergency visas to two hundred prominent artists and intellectuals and their families. Varian Fry, a Harvard-trained classics scholar and foreign affairs journalist, volunteered to travel to Vichy France to organize the exodus.

An unlikely hero, Fry was a sophisticated New England prep school graduate who enjoyed classical Greek, bird watching, and fine wines. "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.

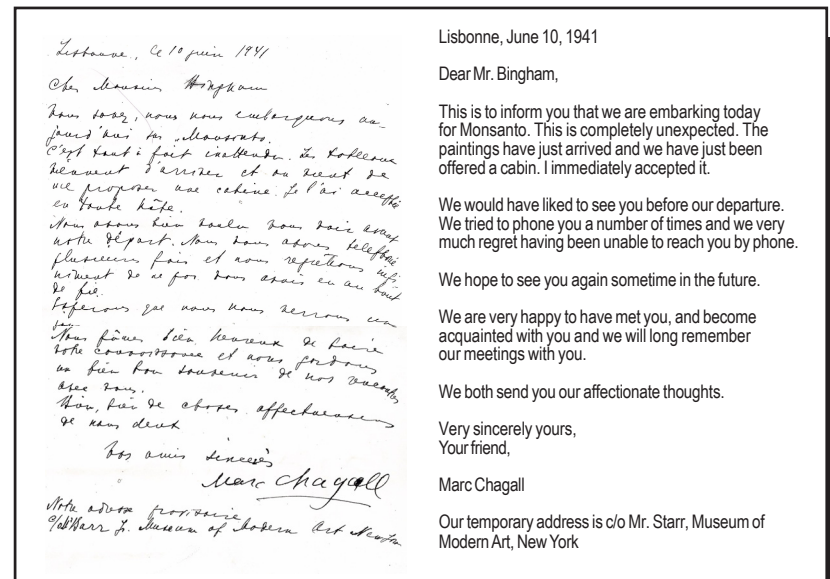
While stationed in Germany on a journalistic assignment in 1935, Fry had witnessed Nazi mob violence against Berlin's Jews. That experience led him to become involved with the Emergency Rescue Committee. In August 1940, he arrived in Vichy France, with \$3,000 taped

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. Bingham believed that Nazi gold, loot, and personnel were being transferred to Argentina and Chile via submarine at the end of the war, in collusion with Nazi elements in Latin America. When the State Department shut down his efforts to investigate the matter, he resigned in protest, thereby losing his pension and sacrificing his career.

Fry, too, suffered for his

activism. His postwar efforts to obtain government employment were repeatedly rejected on the grounds that he was suspected of being sympathetic to communism—even though he himself had publicly split from *The New Republic* because he felt it was insufficiently critical of the Soviets.

Varian Fry and Hiram Bingham IV were true heroes. At great risk to their personal welfare and to their careers, they saved human lives—and saved, for the world, the writers, musicians, and artists who created some of the great cultural works of the twentieth century.



Feuchtwanger, in Bingham's car, made it through German checkpoints to the vice-consul's country house, where he hid until Bingham could help get him out of the country.



*Varian Fry  
1907-1967*

Working eighteen-hour days for more than a year, Fry and his staff smuggled the refugees from France across the Pyrenees mountains into neighboring Spain, and across the Mediterranean by boat to numerous other destinations in Africa, the Caribbean, and elsewhere. Many traveled across Spain to Portugal, where they were safe from the Gestapo, and the refugees could make arrangements to travel to America or else-

where. Altogether, Fry, Bingham, and the other members of their rescue network helped save an estimated 2,000 people, including such famous artists as Marc Chagall, Marcel Duchamp, Max Ernst, and Jacques Lipschitz, as well as Nobel Prize-winning scientists Enrico Fermi and Otto Meyerhof, writers Franz Werfel and Arthur Koestler, architect Walter Gropius, philosopher Hannah Arendt, and Andre Breton, founder of Surrealism.

Fry also helped rescue British pilots who had been shot down by the Germans over France, and he provided important assistance to the Free French underground, for which he was later awarded the Cross of the Legion of Honor.

Fry was in constant danger of being arrested by the Vichy authorities, who regarded his work as subversive. On one occasion, Fry and a group of his associates were arrested by the Vichy French police and jailed on a prison ship. Bingham's intervention, in the name of the American Consulate, helped secure their freedom.

On December 29, 1940, Fry and Bingham met with Chagall in Bingham's villa to begin planning his escape. Shortly afterwards, Fry escorted Chagall to the U.S. Consulate in Marseille, where Bingham quickly granted him an immigration visa, even though the artist did not possess the required affidavits.

Unbeknownst to Fry, the Museum of Modern Art, in New York City, had asked the State Department to grant Chagall a visa back in November 1940—but it took until February 1941 before it was processed. "In other words," Fry noted in his diary, "it took the Department three months to grant him an 'emergency' visa, whereas [Bingham in] the Consulate only required a day or so to give him an ordinary immigration visa."

On March 8, Fry and Bingham traveled to the home of Marc and Bella Chagall in the village of Gordes to help plan their escape from France. "Gordes is a charming, tumbled down old town on the edge of a vast and peaceful valley,"

Fry wrote in his diary. "I can see why they didn't want to leave; it is an enchanted place. Chagall is a nice child, vain and



*Hiram Bingham IV  
1903-1988*

simple. He likes to talk about his pictures and the world, and he slops around in folded old pants and dark blue shirt. His 'studio' contains a big kitchen table, a few wicker chairs, a cheap screen, a coal stove, two easels and his pictures. No chic at all, as chez Matisse ... He is already beginning to pack. He says that when they have gone I can have his house to hide people in. A good, remote place."

In April, the Chagalls moved to a hotel in Marseille in preparation for their departure from France, but when the Vichy police swept through the city's hotels, arresting all Jews, Chagall found himself in prison. Hearing the news, Fry threatened a senior police official that he would set off an international scandal by calling the *New York Times* and telling them of the arrest unless Chagall were released within half an hour. Fry's threat, together with the intervention of Bingham, worked. Chagall was set free.

On May 7, Marc and Bella crossed into Spain by train, then continued on to Lisbon, arriving on May 11. There they waited while their daughter and son in law, Ida and Michel Rappoport, prepared to bring Chagall's paintings, which had been shipped to Spain. But once again, disaster threatened. The Spanish customs authorities were holding up the transfer of Chagall's art work, reportedly because of Gestapo pressure. Ida went to Madrid to try to rescue the art, but Michel was arrested while trying to cross

the Franco-Spanish border and had to be smuggled out of prison. Ida, Michel, and the crates of artwork eventually made it across the Atlantic in a hazardous, typhoid-ridden journey on a barely-seaworthy cargo ship that avoided German torpedoes on the way to America but was hit and sunk on the way back.

The rescue of Marc Chagall was one of Fry and Bingham's greatest, and final, successes. Furious German and Vichy officials complained to the State Department about Fry's refugee-smuggling work. Anxious to avoid irritating American-German relations — the U.S. was not yet at war with Hitler — 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.

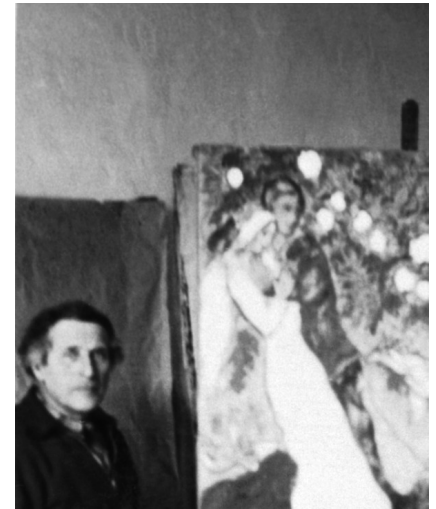
Back in New York, Fry became one of the editors of a leading magazine, *The New Republic*. He used its columns to alert the American public about the plight of the Jews in Europe and to press for U.S. government action to aid the refugees.

to his leg to hide it from the Gestapo and a list of 200 endangered individuals.

Fry immediately made contact with a group of Jewish, German, and other anti-Nazi activists, including a number of Americans involved in helping refugees escape. One was Hiram (Harry) Bingham IV, the U.S. vice-consul in Marseille, who was hiding refugees at his rented villa on the outskirts of the city. Fry later dubbed Bingham his "partner in crime" — the "crime" of rescuing refugees from the Nazis and their French collaborators.

Bingham was the son of a U.S. Senator and explorer upon whom Steven Spielberg reportedly based his famous movie character, Indiana Jones. Defying his bosses at the State Department, Bingham provided Fry with documents needed to protect refugees, such as affidavits in lieu of passports and travel documents.

With the assistance of Bingham and others, Fry set up his rescue operation under the front of a legitimate refugee aid operation at the Hotel Splendide in Marseille. Word of Fry's work spread quickly and refugees



Chagall with his famous painting "Three Candles," which he was working on at the time of his rescue from Vichy France

were soon lining up each day outside his hotel room, 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, Bingham arranged for the famous German Jewish novelist, Lion Feuchtwanger, to be smuggled out of a Vichy internment camp disguised in women's clothing. Posing as Bingham's mother-in-law from Germany,