

# Varian Fry

Varian Fry was born in New York, NY, in 1907. He received his B.A. from Harvard College in 1931 and took graduate courses in history and international relations at Columbia University. Fry served as the editor of *The Living Age*, a review of international affairs. He traveled to Germany for *The Living Age* in 1935. In Berlin, he witnessed a savage anti-Semitic pogrom that he reported to the American press. In 1938, Fry became the editor of the Foreign Association's *Headline Books*, a series of short books on foreign relations.

When Germany invaded France in June 1940, Fry agreed to go to Marseilles as the representative of the Emergency Rescue Committee, a newly formed, private American relief committee. In Marseilles, Fry offered aid to antifascist refugees, both Jews and non-Jews, threatened with extradition to Nazi Germany under Article 19 of the Franco-German Armistice—the "Surrender on Demand" clause.

In opposition to French and even obstructionist American authorities, Fry assembled a band of associates and built an elaborate rescue network. Convinced that he could not abandon the operation while the desperate refugees needed him, Fry extended his stay in France to 13 months. He persevered without his passport, under constant surveillance, and was questioned and detained by the authorities.

Fry established a legal French relief organization, The American Relief Center, and worked behind its cover using illegal means—black-market funds, forged documents, secret mountain passages, and sea routes—to spirit endangered refugees from France. Among those Fry saved were notable European intellectuals—writers, artists, scientists, philosophers, and musicians. Their arrival in the United States significantly changed the character of American culture.

Fry ignored repeated entreaties from the American government to return to the United States. In September 1941, the Vichy French government finally ousted him for "protecting Jews and anti-Nazis."

When Fry returned to New York, he recounted his story and tried to warn of Hitler's impending massacre of the Jews of Europe. In 1945, he published *Surrender on Demand*, his recollections of his mission to Marseilles. His activities in France prompted the Federal Bureau of Investigation to open a file on him and to keep him under surveillance, preventing him from working for the United States government.

Shortly before his death, the French government awarded Fry the *Croix de Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur*. It was the only official recognition he received during his lifetime. Fry died in 1967 while revising his memoirs. He left behind a wealth of written and photographic materials that document his experiences in

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France. *Assignment: Rescue*, the version of his memoirs Fry rewrote for young readers, was published shortly after his death.

In 1991, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Council awarded the Eisenhower Liberation Medal, posthumously, to Varian Fry. Yad Vashem, The Holocaust Heroes and Martyrs Remembrance Authority, Jerusalem, posthumously honored Fry, in February 1996, as the first American "Righteous Among the Nations."

The Varian Fry Foundation was formed in 1997 under the auspices of the International Rescue Committee, survivor organization to the Emergency Rescue Committee."

[Source: The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum [exhibition brochure]. *Assignment: Rescue, The Story of Varian Fry and the Emergency Rescue Committee*. Washington, DC: USHMM, 1997, pp. 12-14.]