

Israel Honors American Who Rescued Jews Thousands escaped Nazis in France

By Jack Katzenell
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When American Varian Fry landed in Marseille in August 1940, with the reluctant permission of the U.S. government, he was supposed to rescue 200 Jewish artists and intellectuals from the Nazis and get out in three weeks.

But Fry, a high school Latin teacher from Ridgefield, Conn., stayed 18 months. Aided by a few expatriate Americans and French volunteers, he saved nearly 4,000 people, sneaking them out with forged passports or smuggling them across the mountains into Spain.

Yesterday, nearly 30 years after his death, Fry was honored by the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial as one of the "Righteous Among the Nations" in a ceremony attended by his son and Secretary of State Warren Christopher. Fry is the only American to have received the honor recognizing gentiles who helped save Jews.

Among those he saved from deportation to Nazi death camps were Russian-born painter Marc Chagall, German-born philosopher Hannah Arendt, sculptor Jacques Lifschitz and writer Leon Feuchtwanger.

"Operating under constant threat, without regard for his personal safety, Varian Fry worked tirelessly . . . to secure a safe passage for those who came to him," Christopher said at the ceremony.

"Regretfully, during his lifetime his heroic actions never received the support he deserved from our government, including I also regret to say, the State Department."

Indeed, Fry's effort were hampered by the U.S. government. When Fry's trip to assist specific Jews turned into a mission to save any Jew he could find, his passport was seized by U.S. officials in Marseille—leaving him without any identification and operating behind enemy lines in France.

Fry resolved to help the victims of Nazi persecution after seeing a Jew beaten and stabbed during a visit to Berlin in 1935, he wrote in his postwar memoir "Surrender on Demand."

After the 1940 fall of France to the Nazis, a group of Americans led by Frank Kingdom asked first lady Eleanor Roosevelt to help them rescue Jewish artists and intellectuals there.

"She telephoned the president on the spot," said Yad Vashem historian Mordechai Paldiel. Roosevelt agreed to issue the 200 visas.

Fry, then 33, volunteered to lead the mission.

Arriving in Marseille with \$3,000, he joined the Quakers and the Salvation Army in providing hot meals for French refugees who fled

from the Alsace and Lorraine provinces annexed by Germany.

"This enabled him to open an office with a purpose which was not illegal and would serve as a cover for his other activities," Paldiel said.

When the U.S. visas ran out, Varian bought 50 passports from the Czechoslovak Consulate in Marseille and issued them to Jewish refugees, Paldiel said.

Fry also obtained travel documents from the Chinese Consulate. "The documents said the bearer was not allowed to enter China, but that didn't matter," Paldiel said. "The French border guards couldn't read Chinese."

The American arranged to have other refugees smuggled over the Pyrenees into Spain.

French police of the Vichy puppet regime repeatedly searched Fry's office and home, at one point detaining him for a week. In 1941, France deported Fry to Spain.

When he returned to the United States, he was such an outspoken critic of U.S. policy on war refugees that the FBI opened a file on him—a move that later prevented him from getting work in the defense industry. For the rest of his life, he had trouble finding jobs.

Fry died at age 59. He is survived by his wife, Annette; daughter, Sylvia, and son, James, a biologist in Sweden who received a medal in his father's name yesterday.

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