
Reviewed by Judith Szapor, McGill’s University, Montreal

Rosemary Sullivan is Professor of English at the University of Toronto. In addition to maintaining a distinguished academic career, she published several volumes of poetry, essays, and travel writing and is best known as the biographer of three female Canadian literary icons, Elizabeth Smart, Gwendolyn MacEwen, and Margaret Atwood. Her work has been recognized with, among other honours, a Governor General’s Award for *Shadow Maker: The Life of Gwendolyn MacEwen*, the second of her trilogy of literary biographies. *Villa Air-Bel* adds to her long list of recognitions: in June 2007 it was awarded The Canadian Society for Yad Vashem Award in Holocaust History, one of the Helen and Stan Vine Annual Canadian Jewish Book Awards.

The book is both a departure, into historical non-fiction, and familiar territory for Sullivan as *Villa Air-Bel* can be best described as a composite biography. It tells the story of Varian Fry and his rescue mission, along with the life stories of some of his colleagues instrumental in his operation, interwoven with the life stories of some of the important artists and intellectuals they helped escape from Vichy France. The Villa Air-Bel of the title serves as the focal point of the narrative; it was in this somewhat decrepit mansion on the outskirts of Marseille, temporarily shared by Fry, his fellow rescuers, and some of their clients, that the characters described in the book crossed paths for a few months between the fall of 1940 and the summer of 1941.

Varian Fry led one of the largest and most successful rescue operations during World War II, saving thousands of enemies of Nazi Germany, mainly German and Austrian refugees from Hitler who had previously found refuge in France, from almost certain death. The exact number of those saved is still debated, mostly because the activities of Fry and his organization overlapped with other agencies involved in the rescue work – Fry himself estimated it at 2000, others between 1500 and 3000 –, but there can be no doubt about the scale and significance of the achievement itself. Among
those Fry and his colleagues helped to escape from Hitler’s Europe were world-famous artists such as Marc Chagall, Max Ernst, Jacques Lipchitz, and Marcel Duchamp and writers of international stature such as Heinrich Mann, Franz Werfel, and Lion Feuchtwanger. Some of them would return to Europe after the war while others, like Hannah Arendt, young and unknown at the time, would stay to become influential intellectuals. But whether they found temporary refuge in the United States or stayed for good, they changed the face of American arts and letters forever.

Fry was an unlikely hero: a Harvard-educated classics scholar with distinctly upper-class manners and tastes, he was thirty-two in the summer of 1940 when he took leave from his job in New York (he was the editor of a series published by the Foreign Policy Association) for what was to be a month-long assignment in Marseille. He was sent there by the Emergency Rescue Committee, an organization hastily set up by a few New York intellectuals and recent émigrés in June 1940. Watching the rapid advance of Hitler’s army in France, they realized that thousands of anti-Nazi refugees from Germany and Austria were now trapped there. Fry’s friend, Paul Hagen a.k.a. Karl Frank, a German socialist and recent refugee from Hitler’s Europe, was among the first to notice article 19 of the French armistice, committing the French government to “surrender on demand” any non-French citizen requested by the Germans. Unlike most Americans, Fry, a left-wing independent liberal, understood the danger: he had visited Germany in 1935 and his astute observations of the regime’s true face, including its treatment of Jews, were published in *The New York Times*.

The Committee drew up a list of German and Austrian politicians, writers, and artists in immediate danger and, mainly through the intervention of Eleanor Roosevelt secured a number of emergency visas from the State Department. The plan then called for a permanent office of the Committee in New York to keep up fundraising and a man on the ground in the unoccupied Southern half of France, to find the refugees and get them to the U. S.

Fry, with no previous, relevant experience, volunteered and was chosen for lack of a better candidate; and he proved to be a natural, performing the role of the innocent,
naïve American to perfection, while breaking every rule in the book. In the early days of the mission, he took advantage of the general confusion, to get out people on his list, on the run or interned as enemy aliens in French camps, along with British soldiers stuck on French soil. As the degree of collaboration of the Vichy regime with Nazi Germany became more and more obvious and anti-Jewish decrees began to take effect, Fry began to realize the limitations of his position. He began to stray from the list drawn up by the Committee in New York – after all, he was in a much better position to judge the danger his charges faced - and resort to the Marseille black market and criminal underworld, even forgery, to smuggle out people. In the process, he strained his relationship with the Committee, the American Embassy in Vichy, and the State Department in Washington to the breaking point. Extending his assignment by almost a year, by the time he was recalled by the Committee and, a couple of months later, expelled from France with the active collaboration of the State Department, absurdly strict visa rules set up by Vichy and increasing police harassment rendered his mission nearly impossible. And, a few months later, as the U. S. entered the war, the short window of opportunity closed for good.

Fry did not act alone: he was helped by a small group of fellow rescuers. This remarkable cast of characters included young Frenchmen of all denominations; the Protestant Daniel Bénédite, the Catholic Jean Gemähling, and the Jewish Charles Wolff and Jacques Weisslitz would eventually all become heroes of the French Resistance. The Americans were a similarly colourful group: Mary Jayne Gold was an American heiress with left-wing sympathies who put up the rent for Villa Air-Bel and provided regular financial support to Fry’s organization. Miriam Davenport, a young art student passed through Marseille en route to Yugoslavia to rescue her fiancé and stayed on as a staffer. Charles Fawcett, former Legionnaire, future movie star, was the doorman/receptionist for the American Relief Centre, the official façade of Fry’s outfit, an American organization providing humanitarian aid to the refugees while, behind the scenes, they would be smuggled out of France by increasingly illegal means.
Instrumental in the operation was a young and fearless German refugee couple, Lisa and Hans Fittko – she Jewish, he a political émigré – who set up residence in a small French hamlet near the Spanish border and risked their lives daily by escorting refugees into Spain. While on the whole they had a remarkable success rate, the Fittkos’ clients included Walter Benjamin whose tragic end (Benjamin committed suicide after arrested by Spanish border guards) provides the opening scene for Sullivan’s book. Like the Fittkos, several other refugees provided invaluable services to Fry’s operation, postponing their own escape and facing tremendous risks to help others.

The story of “Fry’s list” had been told before, most importantly by Varian Fry and his colleagues themselves. Fry’s own wonderful if slim book, originally titled Surrender on Demand was published in 1945 to lukewarm reception (it was reprinted by Scholastic in an abridged version in 1992), while Lisa Fittko, Mary Jayne Gold, and Daniel Bénédite all published their memoirs in the 1980s. Around the same time Fry and his mission would be finally discovered by historians and featured in a few scholarly and popular articles. In 1997, along with the re-edition of Fry’s book, the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum organized an exhibition with the title “Assignment: Rescue.” There was even a grossly inaccurate, fictionalized film, Varian’s War, produced for cable television in 2001.

In the last eight years, two comprehensive biographies were published on Fry and his mission, Andy Marino’s A Quiet American; The Secret War of Varian Fry (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999, British edition: The American Pimpernel: The Man Who Saved The Artists On Hitler's Death List, London: Hutchinson, 1999) and Sheila Isenberg’s A Hero of Our Own (New York: Random House, 2002). While focusing on Fry’s fateful 13 months in Marseille, both Marino and Isenberg included most of the large cast of rescuers and refugees in their accounts. Marino is the more gifted storyteller who balanced memorable vignettes, portraits, and anecdotes within a clearly drawn historical context, including the role of the French and American governments. He also managed to address important questions about the motives and psychology of rescuers, including a short but insightful comparison of Fry and Schindler.
Isenberg’s biography is a perhaps less grippingly told yet solid, thoughtful work; she follows Fry’s life post-Marseille in an attempt to solve the enigma: the fact that after his heroic feats in Marseilles, Fry went on to live an unremarkable, even unsuccessful life until his early death in 1967. Because of his terminally bad relations with the State Department, following his return to the States, he was not even allowed to serve the war effort in any meaningful way. The only recognition Fry received in his lifetime was the Croix de Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur, awarded at the initiative of then French minister of Culture André Malraux; as one of the organizers of the French Resistance, Malraux had known Fry in Marseille. Outside of France official recognition came even later: 29 years after his death, in 1996, Fry became the first American to be awarded the “Righteous among Nations” medal by Yad Vashem and in a symbolic gesture his tree was planted by Secretary of State Warren Christopher who apologized for his institution’s obstructionist role in the refugee crisis during the war.

Isenberg also devotes considerable attention to the illustrious company taking refuge at the Villa Air-Bel and in two chapters describes the unique atmosphere, complete with impromptu art sales and Surrealist parlour games, in the middle of the 1940-41 Marseille winter of food shortages and fear. It was a temporary haven shared by Fry and his colleagues and the villa’s refugee residents, the Socialist writer Victor Serge and the Surrealists André Breton, Max Ernst, André Masson, and Benjamin Peret. Fry, Isenberg seems to suggest, did not only rescue the Surrealists from certain arrest and deportation - some of them were Jewish, had a Jewish wife and were, collectively, declared “degenerate” by the Nazis - but by providing the means for their cohabitation also reinvigorated the movement.

Sullivan goes even further by making Villa Air-Bel and its residents the focal point of her book, shifting the emphasis from Fry who becomes but one of the many characters whose paths cross in Marseille. Apart from this reconfigured perspective, she has very little to offer to the reader already familiar with the Fry story; the characters, the stories, the quotes from letters, even the scenes recounted in her book had been, with few exceptions, lifted from the above mentioned memoirs and biographies. The one
substantial addition to previous biographies of Fry, an overview of the political and cultural climate of France in the 1930s, is similarly pasted together from the excellent accounts of Herbert Lottman and Alexander Werth.

Among the book’s many female characters, Sullivan’s account assigns the most prominent role to the American heiress Mary Jayne Gold, at the expense of perhaps equally deserving women who contributed to the success of the mission. Gold’s eventful time in Marseille, marked by her generous financial support for the refugees and a tumultuous love affair with a young Frenchman with criminal connections, had been told before, not the least by Gold herself and in Marino’s book. Sullivan’s version and her extensive use of Gold’s memoirs have provoked one of the few unfavourable reactions to her otherwise glowingly received book. On his web site (http://www.chambon.org) Pierre Sauvage, an Emmy-winning documentary filmmaker all but accuses her with plagiarism, comparing Gold’s memoirs and Sullivan’s treatment over dozens of pages. The evidence would most likely not stand up in court; Sullivan might paraphrase and condense more often than one would expect from a writer of her stature but she never fails to cite her sources in the endnotes. Much more alarming is the fact that more than six decades after the events, readers, even reviewers seem to be completely unaware of Fry’s achievement.

The questions probing the reasons behind Fry’s reluctant recognition reach far beyond the proper use of primary and secondary sources. Why had it taken more than 40 years for scholars and American politicians to acknowledge and honour Fry’s achievement? Why is it that, after two previous, well-received biographies, he has still not become a household name on a par with Schindler? Is it, as Pierre Sauvage suggests in his essay (http://www.varianfry.org/sauvage_fry_oxford_en.htm), because his very success highlighted the failure of the American administration in the refugee crisis? Because to celebrate him would have also meant to acknowledge the hostility of the State Department, the hesitance of the President, and – at best - the indifference of the American public? The pioneering works of David S. Wyman (Paper Walls: America and the Refugee Crisis, 1938-1941, University of Massachusetts Press: 1968 and The Abandonment of the Jews: America and the Holocaust, 1941-1945, Pantheon: 1984) were
the first to confront these issues but a scholarly re-examination of Fry’s mission vis-à-vis the American administration’s role, in light of new evidence, is long overdue.

Sauvage also touches on the fundamental moral dilemma: who do you save when you cannot save everyone? Fry’s operation and its New York office could not function without a fair amount of entrepreneurial spirit and public relations; and as we read in Marino’s account and Sauvage’s essay, the Emergency Rescue Committee constantly pressured Fry to deliver the celebrities, needed to raise their funds and public profile in the U.S. Sauvage is in a privileged position to appreciate the complexity of the problem: his parents, young and undistinguished at the time, were among those Fry’s office declined to help with immigration documents; they survived the war in hiding.

To what degree is Varian Fry a part of Holocaust history? Originally, the mission aimed at rescuing prominent political and intellectual enemies of the Reich, with little realization that many on the list would be at heightened risk because they were also Jews. Fry experienced the growing threat as Nazi and Vichy policies had gradually taken shape, tightening the nook around the Jewish refugees lining up at his office in Marseille. He was also early to connect the dots: his article, “The Massacre of the Jews” in the 21 December 1942 issue of *The New Republic* was one of among the first warnings of the Holocaust and one can only imagine his frustration when it failed to generate any reaction.

Sullivan might have failed to address these questions but her book has nonetheless helped make Fry’s name and achievement more widely known; let us hope it will not be the last word on the man and his mission.