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A Hero of Our Own: The Story of Varian Fry

Sheila Isenberg

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In 1940, a young Harvard-educated American named Varian Fry, inexperienced and not at all certain that he possessed any courage, went on a secret mission to Marseille. There, with only three thousand dollars and a list of names, he was to help those who had fled Nazi Germany and were now trapped in southern France.

The list he took with him had been prepared by, among others, the Museum of Modern Art and Eleanor Roosevelt. It included most of the premier writers, painters, and scientists of Europe, many of them Jews—people like Marc Chagall and Max Ernst, Jacques Lipchitz, Marcel Duchamp, Hannah Arendt, Franz Werfel, André Breton, André Masson, and other sur- realists, and hundreds more. When Fry witnessed their plight, he became determined not just to give them immediate aid but to find ways for them to escape. Slowly he built up a group of people who could help, forging passports and finding secret paths across the Pyrenees into Spain and then to Lisbon.

Fry himself was constantly in great danger, but he seemed to experience a divine inspiration, achieving greatness and glimpsing immortality by acting as the hero he never thought he could be. His own government tried again and again to stop him and send him home, but he managed to continue his rescue operations for more than a year.

Only in the past decade has the world begun to honor Fry, who died in 1967. He is, for instance, the only American honored at Israel's Holocaust memorial, Yad Vashem, as one of the "Righteous Among the Nations."

Using letters and records unavailable to anyone else, as well as interviews with numerous survivors, Sheila Isenberg has given us an inspiring story of how the brave and determined actions of one individual can help change the world.

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