First Opinion: Rescue from the Nazis


Gordon R. Mork

Varian Fry, a young American, directed a small but effective rescue effort early in World War II France. Officially, he was a relief worker for the “Emergency Rescue Committee,” based in New York. France fell to Germany in 1940, and the U.S. was not in the war until late 1941. So, he could legally go to Marseilles, in southern France, to help refugees who were fleeing Hitler with funds and relief supplies.

However, Varian Fry did much more. His “secret mission” was to smuggle the refugees out of France, through neutral Spain and Portugal, and eventually to the U.S. That task often required illegal activities involving currency manipulation, forged documents, bribery, and elaborate (if small scale) diplomatic initiatives.

When he left New York he expected to be gone for only three weeks. He ended up staying more than a year.

Carla McClafferty is a freelance author who has published two other books for the teen market. Born and raised in Arkansas, where she still makes her home, she is largely self-taught in the field of history. Given her background and target audience, she might have written the book as a novel, emphasizing the dramatic aspects of the story and using the novelist’s privilege of letting her creative skills enhance the narrative. Instead, she has stuck very closely to the documentary record, including memoirs and manuscript sources (like the Varian Fry papers at Columbia University). This approach makes the book more
reliable if perhaps less exciting. There are numerous black and white photographs of the principles and a single map.

As a book for young people, the language is simple and direct. McClafferty takes care to explain some aspects of the early years of World War II and the American diplomacy, which may be unknown to her target readers. Nevertheless, she does not go into the depth that some history teachers might desire. Teenagers, who know little of American isolationism and anti-Semitism prior to Pearl Harbor, may well be puzzled to read of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's reluctance to get involved in rescuing Jewish intellectuals and artists from the Nazis. Varian Fry seemed to get as little cooperation from the U.S. diplomats as he got from the French collaborationist government. However, readers are never really told why.

Varian Fry and his fellow rescuers led frustrating and sometimes dangerous lives, staying only a few steps ahead of pro-Nazi police in France and Spain. Sometimes they received help from unexpected sources, just in time. They were able to save hundreds of anti-Nazi refugees, some Jewish, some not. While their story has long been known to historians, hopefully it will now become familiar to a young generation through this book.

About the Author

Gordon R. Mork is professor of history at Purdue University, with specialties in German history, the Hitler regime, and Holocaust studies.