

Righteous Among Men

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“We were Germans, Germans, Germans all the way through,” stated Kurt Levi, a Holocaust survivor (“Kurt Levi Testimony”). Many German Jews shared Levi’s sentiments and did not believe that they were any different from their next-door neighbor or their friends at school. However, many of these same neighbors and friends would soon turn their backs on them after the Nazis rose to power in 1933. After their loss in World War I, Germany went from prosperity to despair. Political parties in Germany did not have enough power to enforce much of anything. Despite Adolf Hitler’s antisemitic agenda when he became chancellor in 1933, the Jewish people thought the Nazi party would be overtaken much like the previous parties. They believed Hitler and his ideology would blow over, but the Jews could not have imagined the devastation that Nazi Germany would bring to them. Nations worldwide received information about the Jewish treatment under Hitler, and many chose to turn the other way. Righteous individuals would stand up and offer their assistance even if it could potentially cost them their lives. Varian Fry was the first American recipient of the “Righteous Among Nations” medal. After observing a brutal antisemitic uproar in Germany, Varian Fry pledged to help the European Jews and ended up saving around 2,000 lives (“Kurt Levi Testimony”; “Varian Fry’s Holocaust rescue”).

Varian Fry became a horrified witness to the persecution of Jews in Europe when he was a journalist living abroad. In 1935, he was appointed as a foreign correspondent for *The Living Age* and journeyed to Berlin, Germany where he was confronted with a violent anti-Jewish riot. During the pogrom, he saw a sickening sight: a man lying on the side of the road after being spat on, a bleeding woman, a man with his head coated in blood, and a hysterically crying woman. The police

did nothing to help these victims of aggression. Being disgusted by what unfolded in front of him, Fry committed at that moment to help the suffering Jews. He proclaimed, "I could not remain idle as long as I had any chances at all of saving even a few of its intended victims" ("Emergency Escape: Varian Fry").

Fry made various attempts at assisting the Jewish people, ranging from joining Jewish relief committees in America to personally aiding the escape of Jews from Nazi tyranny. Around 200 American journalists, Jewish refugees, artists, and university presidents formed the Emergency Rescue Committee in May 1940. Among them was Varian Fry. This committee focused on assisting intellectuals trapped in Vichy France, the only part of France not under German occupancy. Vichy France was free to live their lives as long as they turned over any individuals the Nazis demanded. On August 4, 1940, Fry volunteered to help individuals in this area by aiding in their escape. He helped thousands of refugees before reporting back to the US after his assistance angered the US State Department and Vichy France officials. The US State Department turned a blind eye to Jewish oppression and even issued a memorandum heavily limiting visa distributions. Assistant Secretary of State, Breckinridge Long, wrote in the memorandum, "...put every obstacle in the way...which would postpone and postpone and postpone the granting of the visa" (Long). Immigrants and refugees from around the world, except Canada, had to obtain extensive documentation to access the United States. The immigration process was time-consuming, costly, and highly selective. Many documents were required such as tax documents, police certificates, visa applications, birth certificates, medical clearances, and inventory lists. Immigrants also had to have a relative living in America who would sponsor them financially and take accountability for them. Only a small portion of immigrants were selected due to the quota and intense regulations. Fry's efforts made a significant impact on those who could not make it through the visa applications (Long; "Emergency Escape: Varian Fry"; "What did Refugees Need to Obtain").

Out of the roughly 2,000 anti-Nazi and Jewish refugees that Varian Fry saved, many have left their mark on American culture. This included family members of Thomas Mann, a novelist who won the 1929 Nobel Prize in literature, Jean Arp, an artist who developed Dadaism and Surrealism in the early twentieth century, and Hannah Arendt, an influential yet controversial philosopher and historian. Due to Hitler's rise to power, Arendt escaped from Germany in 1933 and journeyed to Paris. She joined the World Zionist Organization in Paris and helped Jewish children emigrate to Palestine. After WWII broke out, Arendt was arrested and detained at Gurs, an internment camp, for multiple weeks. Fry assisted in issuing Arendt's visa to allow her out of Germany and into the United States. It is believed that if Fry waited any longer, Arendt would have been deported to Auschwitz. She got to New York right before the borders were sealed. In the United States, Arendt worked as a professor at many prestigious universities including Princeton, Berkeley, and Chicago. During the post-war years, she published many impactful pieces such as *The Human Condition*, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, and *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. In *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Arendt wrote, "...but just as the Nazis' feverish attempts, from June 1942, on, to erase all traces of the massacres...were doomed to failure, so all efforts to let their opponents 'disappear in silent anonymity' were in vain...One man will always be left alive to tell the story" ("Hannah Arendt"; "'Quote' of the Week"; Rajagopal; Tömmel).

Disgusted at the indifference of German police during a riot against Jewish people, Varian Fry swore to make a difference and assisted in the escape of roughly 2,000 Jews from Europe. Fry stated that he could not remain idle as he saw the inhumane treatment of Jews during his time in Berlin. This motivated him to join with others in the Emergency Rescue Committee to help the intelligentsia trapped in Vichy France. This included Hannah Arendt, one of the most influential political theorists of her time. Varian Fry's accomplishments show that one person can get it done. Without his endeavor, 2,000 more lives would have likely been lost to the tragedy of the Holocaust.

Today, America presents opportunities for individuals who want a second chance at life. Around 13.6 percent of people living in the United States were born in a foreign country. Many seek asylum due to war, poor living conditions, and lack of economic opportunities. I firmly believe that America should try to accommodate as many immigrants as possible while also not endangering national security. Proper documentation should be required but nothing to the extent of the 1930s to 40s. There should also be a decrease in how long it takes to acquire a visa. Some situations require individuals to seek refugee immediately. Instead of government money going towards building obstacles in their way, we should focus on building shelters and creating a safe place for refugees and immigrants. They benefit our economy as well. They work hard to make a living in the US and impact the economy positively. Many make up a considerable fraction of essential workers. Immigrants make up 22.8 percent of STEM workers, 22.2 percent of business workers, and 15.2 percent of nurses. Lessons should be learned in history so that we do not make the same mistakes again. Turning a blind eye to a growing problem does not fix it. America is one of the top powers in the world and we should use that to solve conflicts before it comes knocking at our door. A smaller problem is easier to deal with than a larger problem. Governments also should not rely on individuals to take action. It is much more effective if a larger entity becomes involved. Many more lives could have been saved during the Holocaust if more countries and their governments got involved (“Immigrants in United States of America”).

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