



Social Responsibility

Varian Fry

Marseilles, France... August 1940 – On June 22, 1940, France surrendered to Germany and the two countries signed an armistice. France was divided into a Northern Zone, which was occupied by the Germans, and a Southern Zone, which was controlled by a French government, based in the town of Vichy, that was eager to assist the Nazis. Thousands of refugees living in the Southern Zone, both Jews and anti-Nazi non-Jews, were suddenly in danger of being turned over to the *Gestapo* (German secret state police) and sent to Germany. Troubled by this situation, a group of American citizens formed a relief organization to help the refugees. They called it the Emergency Rescue Committee (ERC).

Varian Fry, an American journalist, volunteered to travel from New York to Marseilles, a port city in southern France, as a representative of the ERC. Although U.S. policy toward refugees was unaccommodating, the government agreed to provide entry visas to two hundred refugees in France – prominent political leaders, scientists, artists, and writers. Varian's task was to help them get out. He arrived in Marseilles in August 1940 with a list of names and \$3,000.

Refugees from all walks of life heard about Varian's mission and approached him for help. Varian was shocked to learn that thousands were unable to leave due to bureaucratic hurdles that stood in the way. He felt a responsibility to help as many people as possible. Varian rented an office and assembled a staff of American expatriates, French relief workers, and refugees. In direct opposition to the Vichy regime and the American consulate, he and his accomplices used black-market funds to forge passports and to smuggle refugees out of France; some by sea, and some by land, across the border into Spain. Varian established a legal organization, the American Relief Center, to serve as a cover for his illegal rescue work.

Varian turned his three-week mission into a thirteen-month stay. As the rescue work expanded, however, it became harder to keep it secret. Both the French authorities and the American consulate in Vichy condemned Varian's efforts. He was detained and questioned on more than one occasion. When his passport expired, the American consulate refused to renew it. Varian stayed in France nevertheless, and continued his rescue work. In June 1941, both the American consulate and the Vichy regime ordered Varian to return to the U.S. Ultimately, on September 6, 1941, he was deported by French authorities.

Upon his return to America, Varian continued to speak out about the plight of the refugees. The Emergency Rescue Committee, however, did not permit Varian to represent the organization or to speak on its behalf. He left the ERC and began writing for *The New Republic*, a political magazine. Varian wrote regularly about the United States' restrictive immigration policies. After he gathered information about the Nazis' efforts to wipe out the Jews of Europe, he wrote an article called "The Massacre of the Jews: The Story of the Most Appalling Mass Murder in Human History." In the piece, which appeared in *The New Republic* in December, 1942, Varian called on the United States to allow the unrestricted entry of all who were suffering at the hands of the Germans. His article went largely unnoticed.

Through his actions in France, Varian helped more than 1,000 refugees escape to safety, including some of Europe's leading cultural, intellectual, and political figures. Varian Fry is the only American recognized by Yad Vashem, Israel's Holocaust authority, as a Righteous Among the Nations.

THE JEWISH FOUNDATION *for the righteous*

The Jewish Foundation for the Righteous provides financial support to Christians and Muslims who rescued Jews during the Holocaust and preserves their legacy through its national Holocaust education program.

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Jerzy Radwanek

Oswiecim, Poland... 1940 – Shortly after World War II began in September 1939, Jerzy Radwanek, a pilot in the Polish air force, was assigned to a secret intelligence mission. The *Gestapo* (German secret state police) learned of the operation and arrested Jerzy before it was launched. In the fall of 1940, he was deported to Auschwitz.

Although it would become the deadliest killing center during the Holocaust, Auschwitz began as a prison for Poles who opposed the German occupation of their country. Construction on the first part of the camp began in May 1940, when the Germans converted Polish army barracks near the town of Oswiecim, 37 miles west of Krakow, into a concentration camp. It would become known as Auschwitz I.

Rudolf Höss, the SS captain in charge of the new project, was instructed to build a camp that could accommodate 10,000 prisoners. The idea was that Auschwitz would be a transit camp from which inmates could be sent to camps in the west for slave labor. However, because the region around Auschwitz was discovered to be rich in natural resources, the Nazis decided to house a permanent population of slave laborers at Auschwitz I.

In October 1941, the Germans began construction on Auschwitz II, or Auschwitz-Birkenau, which became the primary site of the genocide of Europe's Jews. Birkenau was originally conceived as a prisoner of war camp that would hold 100,000 inmates, but it evolved into a site of mass murder once the Final Solution – the Nazis' policy to annihilate all the Jews of Europe – took shape.

In November 1942, the Buna camp at Monowitz, also known as Auschwitz III, was established as the first of several satellite camps located on industrial sites around Oswiecim.

When Jerzy Radwanek arrived at Auschwitz I in the fall of 1940, he worked with other Polish inmates to establish a secret military organization inside the camp. They planned escape routes and documented atrocities committed by the Germans. Jerzy was given the job of a camp electrician and was able to move about the grounds more freely than most other inmates. On several occasions, he was sent to the Jewish barracks to repair wiring and install lights. He was deeply disturbed by the plight of the Jewish inmates and decided to do whatever he could to help them. Despite the dire circumstances he himself faced, Jerzy felt a responsibility to ease the suffering – or at least to try – of the Jews imprisoned with him.

Often, Jerzy would purposely cause a short circuit in a Jewish compound so that he would be called in to fix it. On such occasions, he smuggled food and medicine in his toolbox that he had stolen from the Germans. When the guards' attention wandered, Jerzy distributed the items to the Jewish women and young people. He was caught more than once and severely beaten for offering this aid. Jerzy befriended several of the women whom he visited, and he promised, if he survived, to tell the world of the brutality and suffering he witnessed. The Jews who came to know Jerzy called him the "Jewish Uncle" of Auschwitz. Jerzy was a prisoner in Auschwitz from May 1940 until the camp was liberated in January 1945.

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