

**Remarks by Felix Rohatyn '49,
May 2, 2008, on the presentation of
the first Elizabeth and Felix Rohatyn Global Citizenship Award
to Varian Fry**

It is an honor and a pleasure to be here on this special day. I want to begin by thanking President Ron Liebowitz and my fellow members of the board of directors for your strong support of the Rohatyn Center. I also want to thank the Center's superb director, my good friend Allison Stanger. And I want especially to say how deeply honored and grateful we are to have Mrs. Annette Fry with us here today.

Nearly eight years ago, on a glorious fall day in the French city of Marseille, I stood at a microphone and looked out as a crowd filled the city square below. I could see the Mediterranean on one side, glistening to the horizon, and blue peaks of the Alps rising on the other side. I also could see sharpshooters on the surrounding roofs.

I was the U.S. ambassador to France, and as such I had made many speeches. But this speech, in this city, had special meaning to me. Sixty years earlier, in September 1940, my parents and I had arrived in Marseille as refugees on our flight from France. From there we would journey to Casablanca, Lisbon, Rio de Janeiro and finally New York. We were Polish Jews, marked for death if the Germans caught up with us. We had just passed a German checkpoint where a guard waved us through as he lit a cigarette.

In Marseille, we had been able to obtain papers to effect our escape, and over the years, I had remembered many times those dark days when Auschwitz was only one policeman's cigarette away.

But on that beautiful day in October of 2000, I was joining the city of Marseille as it paid homage to an extraordinary man by naming the square before me in his honor. He was a man whose stubborn vision and tireless courage there a half-century earlier had spared hundreds of Europeans from imprisonment and death, and in so doing changed the shape of western thought and culture in our lifetimes. Indeed, the dedication of Place Varian Fry was a recognition that was long overdue.

Varian Fry was a patriotic young American, but he was also a citizen of the world. He was a man who saw through the anguish and confusion of a world at war, to the core issues of freedom and survival. Against all odds, in the space of little over a year, he managed to rescue more than 1,500 people fleeing the Nazi menace. And he succeeded, in spite of efforts by the Gestapo and the Vichy police but also by the active discouragement of American diplomats and bureaucrats.

My audience in Marseille knew that among the people Varian Fry rescued were some of the men and women who were illustrious in arts and letters and science, including the painters Marc Chagall, Max Ernst, Marcel Duchamp and the writer André Breton, the philosopher Hannah Arendt, the novelist Heinrich Mann, and the biochemist Otto Meyerhof. But he helped many more, their names now largely forgotten, who were bound together by the burden of their ideas and their thirst for liberty.

The commemoration in Marseille crowned a series of retrospective honors to Fry in my own country, in France and in Israel that sought to preserve and

disseminate the once-obscure story of Varian Fry's time in Marseille in 1940 and 1941. As Secretary of State Warren Christopher had remarked in 1996, collectively they represent *"a promise never to forget the horrors that he struggled against so heroically, a promise to do whatever is necessary to ensure that such horrors never happen again."*

France led the way with this recognition while Fry was still alive by awarding him the Croix du Chevalier of the French Legion of Honor in 1967. He died only a few months later. In 1985, he was recognized by the Israeli Knesset and two years later by the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial in Jerusalem. In 1993, the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington organized an exhibit in his memory that introduced thousands of Americans to this little-known American hero. And in April 2000 in Paris the Mona Bismarck Foundation assembled work of the many artists that Fry helped or tried to save – a visual testament to what might have been lost had Fry and his confrères not filled the breach.

Fry's is a remarkable story. In tattered hotel rooms and cluttered offices all just a few blocks from the Place Varian Fry, Fry and his colleagues at the American Rescue Committee found themselves acting virtually alone as they sought to identify and spirit intellectuals and artists to liberty outside occupied France.

Left to their own resources, they were fiercely independent. But their independence, however essential it seems in retrospect, was not always something they chose. It was imposed upon them by hostile forces and by diplomatic calculations that seemed reasonable to many at the time.

Fry's antagonists in the struggle to secure visas and exit passage for blameless individuals were not just the Nazi regime and the Gestapo patrols in Marseille. They were not just the French Vichy authorities and their local police minions. They were also, I am sad to say, certain high level officials of the United States government, who saw only trouble in Fry's single-minded pursuit of his convictions.

The French people have struggled for over half a century to come to terms with these dark hours of occupation, with the compromises that in some cases implied collaboration, and with the silent complicity of many in the deportation of more than 70,000 Jews, French and otherwise, to Nazi death camps. President Jacques Chirac eloquently and courageously acknowledged these facts in 1995 and he concluded, *"Let us learn to draw the lessons of history. Let us never accept the role of passive witnesses, or accomplices, to the unacceptable."*

Indeed, Fry's thirteen months in Marseille remind us of how exceptional he was as an American. When it comes to the organized resistance against Nazism, and the lack thereof, America too has its own historical record to examine and reflect upon.

Varian Fry's remarkable memoir of his work in France, *"Surrender on Demand,"* and the fine biography of Fry by Andy Marino, *"A Quiet American,"* make it disturbingly clear that the work of the American Rescue Committee was thwarted more than it was facilitated by the United States government.

If many government officials were leery of freelance efforts to extract thinkers and artists, a notable exception was Eleanor Roosevelt, who was

sympathetic to Fry's American sponsors and quietly encouraged their efforts even as the cables from the State Department counseled otherwise.

Maintaining unruffled relations with Vichy was not the only message that got through to the field, however. According to the State Department, the artists and intellectuals on Fry's list of endangered Europeans included freeloaders and spies and Communists.

For instance, the American vice-consul at Lyon, in a letter to the Rescue Committee, tried to justify refusing visas to Jewish children because their parents were potential prisoners in German camps and the children could become public charges in the United States.

One of the people saved by Varian Fry was Hannah Arendt, whose philosophical work on the Holocaust is most often remembered for her term "*the banality of evil*." The term well describes the mindset of some high-ranking bureaucrats at the State Department who failed to fill visa quotas and turned ships loaded with refugees back to Europe and the concentration camps.

One of these influential diplomats wrote a memorandum in 1940 that makes plain the lengths some American officials would go to obstruct their rescue – "*simply advising our consuls to put every obstacle in the way . . . and to postpone and postpone and postpone the granting of the visas.*"

For many of these people, of course, "*postpone and postpone*" meant deportation and ultimate delivery to the concentration camps.

Fry was not the only person, American or otherwise, who stood up to powerful people and institutions. But when we etched his name permanently on

the streetscape of Marseille, and when we remember him today, we also remember countless others of every nationality who had the conviction to overcome bureaucratic obstacles, personal discomfort and even the threat of death, to do what was plainly right.

I was proud as the United States ambassador to help with the commemoration of the Place Varian Fry. I know from personal experience that the United States Foreign Service and State Department today have a very different view of the world than those over a half-century ago, whose unfortunate examples I have cited here. Our former Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, who was also a refugee from those dark times, is one of the best examples of that enlightenment.

So it was that I felt the weight of that dedication in Marseille as an ambassador, but also with the memory of a child in wartime Europe, whose parents had been among thousands of refugees seeking a way out.

As far as I know, they never knew Fry – they were neither artists nor intellectuals. But the documents which enabled us to leave Marseille for safety may well have been acquired by some of Fry's associates; we will probably never know.

French and American, we have come a long way since those awful days, building stronger and more tolerant and inclusive societies in the process.

But Fry's stirring example is also a warning against the complacency that afflicts us when we become too optimistic about human progress, when we fail to recognize wrong and to change our habits when circumstances require it.

Varian Fry was a public servant in the truest sense of the term. He can now be seen as the father of a new kind of international engagement most obviously represented today by hundreds of non-governmental organizations that work – “without borders” – to tackle problems that the most talented officials will not or cannot.

They do not have a monopoly on truth or courage any more than governments do, but they have matured to become essential components of international understanding and humanitarian action, often leading the way for nations to try to balance human justice and global peace.

For that legacy, too, we have Varian Fry to thank, Varian Fry to remember.

Thank you all very much.

Afterward:

*And now, it is my pleasure to recognize an individual who, more than any of us, continues the spirit of Varian Fry and keeps his legacy alive. It is my privilege to present the first **Elizabeth and Felix Rohatyn Global Citizenship Award** to Mrs. Annette Fry.*