

**ARE THERE COWS IN AMERICA?**  
***Fraught Relations Between Varian Fry and Marc Chagall***

*TRANSATLANTIC* is a fictionalized and seriously flawed series currently showing on Netflix that describes the work of The Emergency Rescue Committee (ERC) in Vichy France early in World War II. The organization had been founded in June 1940 by New York activists under the patronage of Eleanor Roosevelt and its base of operations in Marseilles was headed by a 32 year old American journalist Varian Fry. Alfred Barr, Jr., the Director of New York's Museum of Modern Art had drawn up a list of European writers and artists who the Nazis considered to be "degenerate" — the artists included the likes of Marcel Duchamp, Jean Arp, Max Ernst, Man Ray, Paul Klee, Marc Chagall; Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse and Wassily Kandinsky also were on the list but opted to remain in occupied France.

Varian Fry had grown up in Ridgewood, N.J. and after graduating from Harvard worked as a reporter in Berlin during the 1930s. He was deeply disturbed by violence against Jews that he personally witnessed on more than one occasion and said "I could not remain idle as long as I had any chances at all of saving even a few of its intended victims." In August 1940, under the auspices of the ERC, Fry traveled to Marseille with \$3,000 and Alfred Barr's list of 200 refugees under imminent threat of arrest by the French police or agents of the Gestapo. Almost immediately a horde of anti-Nazi writers, avant-garde artists and German socialists clamored at Fry's door, all desperately seeking any chance to escape. Largely as a result of his work at ERC more than 1,500 anti-Nazi and Jewish refugees, among them Hannah Arendt and Andre Breton, were able to flee Vichy France — some climbing over treacherous mountain paths to Spain and Portugal.

Rescuing Marc and Bella Chagall was especially complicated. Chagall's friends in America went to Alfred Barr to get him to invite the painter to exhibit his work at MOMA. This allowed Fry to issue an entrance visa. Next funds were raised, usually in small amounts of \$50 to \$100, to pay for ship passage for the artist and his wife. In addition, a bond of \$3,000 had to be posted as collateral for all immigrants to assure that they would not be a financial burden. But after all this was secured, Marc Chagall hesitated.

So on March 8, 1941 Fry and Vice-Consul Harry Bingham visited the quaint village of Gordes in southern France to deliver the visa and spent the weekend in an attempt to persuade the artist and his wife Bella to leave. Seemingly unconvinced, Chagall asked Fry whether there were cows in America? As Fry wrote in his diary, only after being reassured that there were cows, did Chagall agree to leave.

In fact there was a much more likely explanation than the cow story. According to historian Benjamin Harshav, Varian Fry was rather humorless and didn't appreciate that Chagall was half-joking. In his paintings Chagall often identified with animals, especially cows; even wanted to use the image of a cow on his personal calling card. Harshav suggested that the self-deprecating artist saw himself as a dull-witted animal (*beheyme* in Yiddish) — as if to ask, “Would they accept a dumb cow like me?” His reluctance may have reflected uncertainty about whether there would be a market for his work in America and, also, he worried about the language barrier. He didn't speak English well and wasn't sure that he would be able to communicate with people there — indeed, later when living in New York he felt most comfortable with Yiddish speakers.

After Fry's visit to Gordes he wrote in his diary, “Chagall is a nice child, vain and simple. He likes to talk about his pictures and the world, and he slops around in folded old pants and dark blue shirt.....[He] kept asking me anxiously whether there are cows in America. But he is already beginning to pack. He says that when they have gone, I can have his house to hide people in. A good, remote place.”

Varian Fry added, “I have come to the conclusion that the American consulate in Marseilles is a good deal more generous and a good deal more liberal in its attitude toward refugees than the State Department. Chagall's experience proves it, I think. The Museum of Modern Art asked the State Department to grant him an “emergency” visa last November. Not knowing this, I took him to the Marseilles Consulate in January and got him an immigration visa with no affidavits at all. In fact, all he had in his dossier was a letter from me guaranteeing him politically. It was not until February 10 that the Consulate received the Department's authorization to grant Chagall a [an ordinary] visa. Meanwhile, he already had his visa [from me for] a full month.”

On April 10 Fry noted, “official anti-semitism is very strong here now and getting stronger every day. We [ERC] are already in bad odor because we help so many Jews and have a number of Jewish employees. I have even been accused of being a Jew myself. Jews — even American citizens — are now treated with extreme contempt officially.” The Chagall’s moved to a hotel in Marseilles but within a month all Jews were arrested by the French security police, among them Marc and Bella. Fry called a high police official and warned that he would inform the New York Times and there would be an international scandal unless the famous artist was released — they were set free within half an hour.

On May 7, 1941 the Chagall’s crossed the Spanish border by train and four days later arrived in Lisbon. Their daughter Ida and her husband had much more difficulty obtaining funds and a visa, but eventually were able to sail to America bringing with them the paintings for the exhibition at MOMA. Before the Chagall’s sailed, Marc wrote to Solomon Guggenheim in New York, “I hesitated for a long time to take this long trip. By nature I am lazy about the slightest move and have trouble traveling.” While at sea Marc Chagall wrote a poem in Yiddish:

I came to the ship,  
Told you farewell —  
You took over my earth,  
The graves by the river.

But you wiped out my grief,  
Veiled my home from me,  
Opened a new page for me,  
Revealed a new land.

Don’t leave me adrift in mid-sea,  
Where hordes of weary brothers, pitiless,  
Remind me of my pedigree and my race.

Let my road stretch without menace —  
How shall I bless you my God,  
And on what day shall I fast?

Varian Fry worked tirelessly in Marseilles for thirteen months, using both legal and illegal means, but his activities put him in conflict with the Vichy police who put him under surveillance. In September 1941 the U.S. State Department decided they no longer could countenance evading the laws of Petain's Vichy government with which the United States maintained friendly relations. Varian Fry was recalled and when he returned home to New York, he received a chilly reception, not only from the State Department whose policies he had flouted, but also from higher-ups at the Emergency Rescue Committee who disapproved of his extralegal methods.

However, that wasn't the end of the Fry-Chagall narrative. In 1964 Varian Fry was working for the International Rescue Committee in New York when that organization planned to publish a portfolio of lithographs by famous artists to commemorate the 25th anniversary of their wartime work. Artists who agreed to donate to the project included Picasso, Miro, Ernst, Giacometti, Kokoshka, Moore, Lipschitz, Motherwell, Calder and, of course, Varian Fry wanted Chagall to participate. Fry enlisted the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS) in New York to offer an honorary degree and for the French Minister of Culture Andre Malraux to award the artist the Legion of Honor medal, but Chagall was evasive.

Varian Fry persisted for more than three years. He travelled to France to meet Chagall's daughter Ida who was sympathetic but powerless. He wrote several dozen letters to Chagall and when he visited the old man in Vence, Chagall appeared nervous, "embarrassed not to promise a litho but afraid his second wife would make a scene." Apparently the totally controlling and greedy Vava forbade donating anything without full compensation. At one point in 1965 when the painter seemed about to relent, Fry wrote to a friend, "It looks as though I have managed to trap the old rogue into a commitment after all." But not so, and it was only after Fry's death in 1967 at the age of 59, that Chagall finally delivered a lithograph to his publisher — unsigned.

Just prior to his untimely death from a stroke, the French government honored Varian Fry with the *Croix de Chevalier de la Legion d'Honneur* for his rescue activities. Later, Yad Vashem, honored Fry as a "Righteous Among the Nations," making him the first American to have received that distinction. Indeed some called him "The American Schindler."



Varian Fry

Yes, there are cows in America. Chagall and infant son David at their temporary home in rural High Falls N.Y. c.1947.



Michael Nevins, April, 2023