

Varian Fry's Grave Responsibility

- **Compelling Question**
 - How can Varian Fry's actions inspire you to be more responsible toward society?
- **Virtue:** Responsibility
- **Definition** – Responsibility is accountability to myself and others.
- **Lesson Overview**
 - In this lesson, students will learn about Varian Fry and his role in helping refugees escape the dangers posed by Nazi Germany. Through his example, they will learn how they can be more responsible in their own lives.
- **Objectives**
 - Students will analyze Varian Fry's performance during the opening years of World War II.
 - Students will understand how a sense of responsibility guided Varian Fry's actions.
 - Students will apply this knowledge to better understand responsibilities in their own lives and how they can act upon them.
- **Background**
 - The "fog of war" is a common expression during a conflict. It alludes to the unknown actions of the enemy, hidden deep within his own territory and confused and obfuscated by rumor and gossip. The situation for the Jewish population in Germany was unclear to many, particularly in the United States. As the Nazi regime rose to power, their position in German society became more and more marginalized. Whether it was a natural tendency across Europe toward anti-Semitism or just the "fog of war," one can only speculate. However, there was one American who saw the danger clearly and acted. His name was Varian Fry, and he knew he had a responsibility to help his fellow man.
- **Vocabulary**
 - Obfuscate
 - Marginalize
 - Speculate
 - Anti-Semitism
 - Correspondent
 - Persecute
 - Non-Aryan
 - Aryan
 - Leveled
 - Progressively
 - Irrational
 - Regulations
 - Synagogues
 - Barbarity
 - Oppression
 - Refugee
 - Anteroom
 - Exerted
- **Introduce Text**
 - Have students read the background and narrative, keeping the "Walk-In-The-Shoes" question in mind as they read. Then have them answer the remaining questions below.
- **Walk-In-The-Shoes Questions**
 - As you read, imagine you are the protagonist.
 - What challenges are you facing?
 - What fears or concerns might you have?
 - What may prevent you from acting in the way you ought?
- **Observation Questions**
 - Who was Varian Fry?
 - What did Varian Fry do during the opening years of World War II?
 - What do Varian Fry's actions say about his identity?

- **Discussion Questions**
 - Discuss the following questions with your students.
 - What is the historical context of the narrative?
 - What historical circumstances presented a challenge to the protagonist?
 - How and why did the individual exhibit a moral and/or civic virtue in facing and overcoming the challenge?
 - How did the exercise of the virtue benefit civil society?
 - How might exercise of the virtue benefit the protagonist?
 - What might the exercise of the virtue cost the protagonist?
 - Would you react the same under similar circumstances? Why or why not?
 - How can you act similarly in your own life? What obstacles must you overcome in order to do so?
- **Additional Resources**
 - "A Tribute to Varian Fry." A Tribute to Varian Fry. <http://isurvived.org/VarianFry-TRIBUTE.html>.
 - Jaffee McCabe, Cynthia, "Wanted by the Gestapo: Saved by America – Varian Fry and the Emergency Rescue Committee" 79-91 in Jarrell C. Jackman and Carla M. Borden, eds., *The Musses Flee Hitler: Cultural Transfer and Adaptation 1930-1945*. Smithsonian, 1983.
 - McClafferty, Carla Killough. *In Defiance of Hitler: The Secret Mission of Varian Fry*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux (BYR); 2 September 2008.

Handout A: Varian Fry's Grave Responsibility

Background

The 'fog of war' is a common expression during a conflict. It alludes to the unknown actions of the enemy, hidden deep within his own territory and confused and obfuscated by rumor and gossip. The situation for the Jewish population in German was unclear to many, particularly in the United States. As the Nazi regime rose to power, their position in German society became more and more marginalized. Whether it was a natural tendency across Europe toward anti-Semitism or just the "fog of war," one can only speculate. However, there was one American who saw the danger clearly and acted. His name was Varian Fry and he knew he had a responsibility to help his fellow man.

Narrative

Varian Fry was born in New York City in 1910. The country was experiencing growth at a pace never seen before. At the age of three, the hustle and bustle of the city had become too much for Fry's parents, and they relocated to New Jersey.

From an early age, Varian had a desire to help his fellow man. At the age of 9, he and his friends conducted their own fund raiser for the American Red Cross in an effort to raise money for their efforts in Europe at the outbreak of the First World War.

Fry was an intelligent boy, always scoring high marks in school. He also had a natural knack for picking up languages. He attend Harvard as an undergraduate and along with fellow students, founded a literary quarterly known as "Hound & Horn." Upon graduating, he put his literary skills to use and began working as a foreign correspondent.

It was in this role that he first became exposed to the evils of the Nazi regime. On a visit to Berlin in 1935, Fry personally witness the abuse that was being leveled against Jews. This turned him into an ardent anti-Nazi. Jews began to be persecuted in Germany, almost from the very beginning of the Nazi Regime. On April 1, 1933, Hitler passed a national boycott on Jewish business. On April 7, the Nazi government passed a law requiring all "non-Aryan" civil servants to retire. Any person who had even one Jewish parent or grandparent was considered to be non-Aryan. On May 10, 1933, a nationwide book burning was held in an attempt to remove libraries of books considered to be "non-German." This was little more than an attempt to remove any Jewish influence from German cultural life.

By 1935, when Varian Fry visited Berlin, things had gotten progressively worse. Pressure against Jews to leave the country voluntarily was dramatically stepped up. Jews could be harassed and subjected to violence at any moment. Jewish businesses were also subject to irrational and impossible regulations and standards. Though few could see how far the Nazi's were willing to go with their hatred toward the Jewish people, the signs were not positive. In 1938, things got even worse. Kristallnacht, or the night of broken glass, on November 9, 1938 was a night of extreme and unchecked violence against Jewish shops, synagogues, and property throughout Germany. Following this night of violence, laws against the Jews got more strict and irrational.

Varian Fry watched this descent into barbarity from a distance. He did all he could to raise money to support European anti-Nazi movements and wrote books and articles in an attempt to highlight the cruelty of the Nazi regime.

War broke out in 1939 when Germany invaded Poland. What followed was called the "phony war," a period of months where Germany and Britain sat and waited to see how Germany would move next. In June of 1940, German armor rolled through France. By August, France had surrendered and Varian Fry had traveled to Marseille, in the newly formed Vichy government of unoccupied France. He had by this point become a member of a new organization. Known as the Emergency Rescue Committee, this group was dedicated to helping all those who wished to flee the Nazi regime.

Varian Fry set to work. With only \$3,000 and a short list of refugees, he began hiding those fleeing Nazi oppression and worked to get them exit visas out of the country. Hundreds of artists, musicians, and countless other nameless professions found their way to Fry. With the help of Hiram Bingham IV, vice Consul in Marseilles, Varian Fry would get the refugees exit visas, then get them to the border, either by boat to Martinique or across the Spanish and Portuguese borders to Lisbon, then by air or boat to the United States.

They worked tirelessly, obtaining travel documents for thousands upon thousands of refugees. Fry wrote in a letter to his wife,

“Among the people who have come into my office, or with whom I am in constant correspondence, are not only some of the greatest living authors, painters, sculptors of Europe...but also former cabinet members and even prime ministers of half a dozen countries. What a strange place Europe is when men like this are reduced to waiting patiently in the anteroom of a young American of no importance whatever.”

By September of 1941, the pressure had become too great and Fry was forced to leave. All told, through the actions of Varian Fry, over 2500 people were saved from Nazi oppression. Without his efforts, the beautiful paintings, sculptures, novels, and influence his refugees exerted after their escape would have been silenced.

Varian Fry saw the Nazi regime for the threat to mankind it was. Upon making this discovery, he did not back down. Varian knew he could not in good conscience turn a blind eye to the threat. His responsibility was to his fellow man. He used all his natural abilities of intelligence, charm, and language to fight against the evil of Nazism.