

**“ALL IN THE SAME BOAT”:
NON-FRENCH WOMEN AND RESISTANCE IN FRANCE, 1940-1944**

by

Hillary Mohaupt

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the University of Delaware in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in History

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ABSTRACT

Resistance in France during World War II has been the subject of much historiographical and popular interest. Few narratives, however, acknowledge the impact of the resistance work of non-French women, who often served in capacities beyond nurse and nurturer. Deeper research into the lives and experiences of foreign women in France who participated in resistance activities reveals much about Vichy's expectations of women's roles under their regime, as well as the limits of exclusive categories of resistance and nationality. In this thesis I explore the participation of non-French women in resistance activities in France by examining their involvement in the American Friends Service Committee, the Emergency Rescue Committee (or Centre Américain de Secours), and Special Operations Executive. The concepts of relief, rescue and recovery help frame the discussion of resistance inherent in the activities of these organizations.

I also examine how these women understood or confronted gendered expectations of work, family and service through their resistance activities, and then recorded their experiences in memoirs, letters and oral histories prepared years after the end of the war. These sources offer the dilemmas of selective, subjective memory, as well as the opportunity to question the political tools that shape official history and the personal motivations that determine institutionalized memory.

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

On the afternoon of December 3, 1940, a group of French policemen rapped on the front door of the Villa Air-Bel, a sprawling rustic mansion at the edge of Marseille. The police searched the villa and detained its residents, which at the time included Surrealist leader André Breton and his wife and daughter, Russian radical Victor Serge and his son and companion, American journalist Varian Fry, and wealthy young American socialite Mary Jayne Gold. The police took them to the Vieux Port, where they were loaded onto a ship the police had appropriated. William Stone, Fry's employer at the Foreign Policy Association in New York—from which Fry had taken a sabbatical in order to go to France the previous August—wrote to his wife, Eileen Fry, the following day: “The State Department assures me that it will continue to do everything possible to affect [*sic*] Mr. Fry's release and to secure the necessary permission for his immediate departure for the United States.”¹ Two days later Stone wrote again: “He and Miss Gold are required to remain in Marseilles apparently under custody of our Consul, pending investigation by French authorities. The Consul was given no indication of the specific

¹ William Stone to Eileen Fry, 4 December 1940, “Sinaïa – Varian Fry's arrest” folder, box 10, Varian Fry Papers, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University in the City of New York.

charges brought against Varian and was simply told that he had been held for ‘suspicious’ activities.’²

Fifty years later, Gold recounted the episode with hindsight’s added perspective. Marshal Henri-Philippe Pétain, the head of the French government at Vichy, was expected in Marseille on December 4. In preparation for his arrival, the city’s police force rounded up those they considered Marseille’s most suspicious residents. Breton and Serge had long been on the Nazis’ black lists, and in the previous four months Fry had created for himself a reputation as a kind of Scarlet Pimpernel offering aid to some of the thousands of refugees clogging Marseille’s streets. Some of those refugees were also detained on the *Sinaïa* that afternoon in early December. Gold recalled, “They were rather upset because we were their hope of getting out and they found that we were incarcerated just like they were, so that wasn’t very reassuring. And, the way I put it, we were all in the same boat.”³

After their eventual release from the ship, Gold continued to take part in Fry’s Emergency Rescue Committee until the following spring, when she returned to the United States. Fry remained in France until August 1941, when the French government succeeded in expelling him, and the Emergency Rescue Committee continued to shepherd refugees out of France until June 1942, when French officials shut down their

² William Stone to Eileen Fry, 6 December 1940, “Sinaïa – Varian Fry’s arrest” folder, box 10, Varian Fry Papers, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University in the City of New York.

³ Mary Jayne Gold, Oral History interview, 10 April 1991, Tape 1, Varian Fry Collection, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, D.C. Gold told this story in an oral history interview, reciting this last sentence as though it were a punch line to a joke she had told numerous times, anticipating laughter with a giggle to accompany the climax. Her telling and retelling of this episode illuminate some of the problems of oral histories, which are addressed throughout this thesis.

office in the heart of Marseille. The Committee's members represented diverse backgrounds and sometimes risked their own lives in order to help the refugees that swarmed their office. Some of the Committee's members were refugees themselves, stranded in Marseille or at the border with Spain as they waited for an avenue out of France. Others, Americans like Fry and Gold, were more likely to be expelled from France or reprimanded by the United States government than to be interned.

The Emergency Rescue Committee was not the lone foreign agency at work in France during World War II. The American Friends Service Committee, a relief organization administered by Quakers, provided aid to ordinary French people as well as refugees and concentration camp prisoners. The American Quakers coordinated the distribution of food and the protection of interned children, and, with the help of European colleagues, continued to provide relief even after their American delegates were forced out of the country. In the meantime, across in the English Channel, special agents were preparing to be parachuted into France, to organize networks of resistance groups and to collect intelligence to aid England's war effort against Germany. Special Operations Executive sent undercover agents into countries across Europe and Asia, but most of its female agents were part of its F and RF Sections, which trained and commissioned agents to pass as ordinary French women. The American Friends Service Committee, the Emergency Rescue Committee, and Special Operations Executive pursued radically different tactics to accomplish a shared vision: Hitler halted, France liberated, and Europeans safe.

With life in France threatened by Nazi occupation and Vichy collaboration, the people who were involved with these organizations participated in resistance

activities that were determined in part by each organization and in part by the individual's relationship to France. The involvement of women in particular reveals a great deal about resistance in France during the Occupation. Just as tracing the margins of a group can elucidate its center, investigating the stories of foreign women in France—those not French but who found themselves in France at a critical point in her history—illuminates the nuances of resistance activities, allowing historians to address questions from a new perspective.⁴ Is it easier to resist in a country that is not one's own, where one ultimately is not responsible for cultural and political systems? How free is a person to act according to her own convictions, rather than according to national mores? To what extent is a non-French resister protected by her allegiance to another country? This thesis seeks to expand the scope of present-day understandings of resistance during World War II by focusing on the experiences of non-French women who took part in resistance activities in France through organizations like the American Friends Service Committee, the Emergency Rescue Committee, and Special Operations Executive. In doing so it aims to deepen present-day comprehension of the significance of women's everyday actions during the war, and to propose a framework for conceptualizing women's work related to resistance.

For the most part, the activities of non-French women could be divided into efforts related to relief, rescue, and recovery. These three concepts are meaningful because they help not only to redefine the boundaries of women's work in these

⁴ For example, Claire Gorrara addressed the lack of women's voices in Henry Rousso's seminal work, *The Vichy Syndrome*. See Claire Gorrara, *Women's Representations of the Occupation in Post-'68 France* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998).

organizations and their commitments to France, but also to highlight the ways in which women's clandestine work might overlap with their more overt jobs.

Relief refers to activities that made life in France more bearable for those for whom the regime change had devastating consequences. Relief work ranged from providing food and shelter to refugees or internees, to coordinating work projects for refugees, to accompanying them through the ever-more-complicated process of procuring the necessary paperwork. Chapter Two will address resistance activities as they were interrelated with relief work, through the lens of Norwegian Alice Resch's time with the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC). For the most part, Resch and her colleagues in the Quaker organization were motivated by humanitarian inclinations that in turn made it impossible for them to remain silent or idle when the needs of Jews and other refugees were so apparent. And, yet, at the same time, some among the AFSC in France professed that resistance and relief were incompatible, not least because some of their overt activities required compliance with Vichy policies and procedures.

Rescue refers to any of the cruelly complicated steps in the process of shepherding refugees out of France. Coordinating visa applications and permits, securing money and sponsorship from abroad, and guiding refugees into safe territory all played a part in rescue work. To highlight the significance of rescue work, Chapter Three will investigate the Emergency Rescue Committee (Centre Américain de Secours) through the contributions of Miriam Davenport and Mary Jayne Gold. Their relationship during and after their shared time in France reveals much about what made their involvement in resistance both possible and significant.

Recovery involved regaining what had been lost on personal, national, and memorial levels. In some ways related to the idea of liberation, recovery as part of resistance challenges historical as well as historiographical understandings of women's contributions to resistance activities. It helps frame a re-examination of women's motivations to take part in armed resistance by suggesting that they were driven by strong reactions against the broader implications of Hitler's advances in France. The idea of recovery also provides a framework for re-evaluating the role of gender in France in the Occupation itself and in the memory of that period. Chapter Four explores this notion by examining the historiography of women trained and deployed by Winston Churchill's Special Operations Executive (SOE), a clandestine agency charged with organizing resistance groups in France—as well as other countries in Europe, Africa and Asia—and supplying their members with arms and intelligence. This chapter pays particular attention to those women agents who went to France with SOE's F section, designated for agents who were not French but who could pass convincingly as such. These agents expressed a deep affinity with France and an earnest desire to undercut its Fascist occupiers. Many, in fact, had spent a substantial amount of time in France and considered it a kind of homeland. Because it trained women to engage in armed guerrilla resistance while simultaneously requiring that they pass undetected among ordinary French women, SOE tested contemporary sexism, and its female agents have continued to challenge historians' romantic visions of women's involvement with resistance.

In recent years, historians have concurred that French women participated in resistance activities to a greater extent than they had in public life in pre-war France. For some women, resistance was their first entrée into the territory of military action.

Historian Hanna Diamond has argued that women, who previously had little contact with political activists, were spurred to action for little other political reason than to liberate France.⁵ Most women in France who did take part in resistance efforts have argued that they did not do anything out of the ordinary: indeed, for some women, resistance work simply meant the continuation of their pre-war activities.⁶ Diamond has further suggested that women were more likely to engage in “more spontaneous unorganized activities,” rather than organized resistance groups, that could easily be integrated into the continuity of their everyday lives and responsibilities.⁷ Moreover, Resistance organizers used the presumption of women’s innocence, ignorance of political questions and physical as well as mental fragility as a cover, a tactic that worked in part because the Germans and the French on the whole shared this impression of women.⁸

Women like those whose stories are told here have occupied a liminal space in the experiences of war, the study of patriotic reactions, and the work of remembering and

⁵ Ibid, 124.

⁶ See, for example, Margaret Rossiter, *Women in the Resistance* (New York: Praeger, 1986), and Margaret Collins Weitz, *Sisters in the Resistance: How Women Fought to Free France, 1940-1945* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1995). Weitz in particular carefully provides a definition for the breadth of what she considers to be resistance, based on the etymological root, “sistere,” to stand: “To stand fast to a position or principle well defines those French who resisted.” See Weitz, *Sisters in the Resistance*, 8.

⁷ Hanna Diamond, *Women and the Second World War in France, 1939-1948: Choices and Constraints* (London: Longman, 1999), 126.

⁸ Hélène Eck, “Les Françaises sous Vichy: femmes du désastre – citoyennes par désastre?” in *Histoire des femmes en occident, 5: le xxe siècle*, ed. Georges Duby and Michelle Perrot (Paris: Plon, 1992), 207. Miranda Pollard was the first to examine Vichy’s policies toward women using gender as a category of analysis; she concluded that Vichy needed to mobilize traditional beliefs about women’s roles in family and motherhood in order to succeed. See Pollard, Miranda, *Reign of Virtue: Mobilizing Gender in Vichy France* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998).

reconstructing the Resistance since the 1940s. Neither completely a part of nor completely divorced from France on any of these fronts, the non-French women discussed here shared some of the qualities, memories and skills of French women engaged in resistance, foreign refugees seeking escape, and male soldiers intent on ridding their homeland of an unwanted occupier. The historiography of Resistance had long conceptualized the problem in terms of armed resistance, and, indeed, some women took part in guerrilla warfare in that vein. However, women were more likely to be responsible for organization, guiding refugees and downed airmen, or working as secretaries. Historian Claire Andrieu has described women's participation in two cultures: one universal and masculine, one separate and feminine. She asks whether this biculturalism facilitated or, rather, impeded women's participation in the Resistance; she interrogates whether it was the dialogue between the two cultures that encourages them to resist; and she asks if, when they did resist, if women were engaging their *vie d'homme* or their *vie de femme*.⁹ Diamond has argued that women's stories of their experiences of the

⁹ Claire Andrieu, "Les résistantes, perspectives de recherche." *Le mouvement social* 180, Pour Une Histoire Sociale de la Résistance (July-Sept. 1997): 70. Andrieu has argued that historians must assume either that women were more passive than men during the war, or that they simply did not identify their actions as resistance. See Andrieu, 73. A comparison between Resch's memoirs and the memoirs of a male counterpart illustrates what Andrieu suggests. Howard Wriggins was an American man who joined the AFSC in Europe as a conscientious objector to the war. In the memoir he published about his work, Wriggins wrote, "We did our best to help people in refugee centers, internment camps and prisons... We brought encouragement across barriers of language and nationality at a time of despair." See Howard Wriggins, *Picking up the Pieces from Portugal to Palestine: Quaker Refugee Relief in World War II* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2004), 204. As an American man, he was motivated by different factors—namely, an ideological objection to war—than was Alice Resch and many of the women with whom she worked in southern France. A Quaker, Wriggins moved from the United States to Europe explicitly to join the American Friends Service Committee as an alternative to fighting in the war; he had no longstanding tie to France or Portugal. By contrast, Resch had been living in France at the time of the invasion, and had been

war are no longer excluded, but rather re-imagined to conform to popular interest in the era. In other words, they have been deemed useful because of how they might re-inforce a still-romanticized view of women's work for armed resistance groups.

Today, the stories of these women's experiences have survived thanks, in part, to the men with whom they worked. Columbia University's Rare Book and Manuscript Library is home to Varian Fry's papers, including correspondence between Fry and his wife, as well as with Mary Jayne Gold and Miriam Davenport. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., houses substantial archival collections related to Fry, including correspondence from the period, official reports of the Centre Américain de Secours, and oral history interviews. The U.S. Holocaust Museum has also retained correspondence and other materials from the late twentieth century, when the museum was researching an exhibit about Varian Fry and his work in Marseille. The museum is also the repository for some records relating to the American Friends Service Committee, which itself has archives in Philadelphia. While much of the paper material from the era of World War II has been transferred to microfilm and is easily accessible, there are few secondary sources related to the history of the AFSC. Alice Resch, Howard Wriggins, and a handful of other AFSC workers have published memoirs, but they and their work have not been the subjects of secondary scholarship, unlike the agents associated with Special Operations Executive. Numerous biographies of

developing close ties to the country as her second home, even as she maintained her identity as a Norwegian, and she joined the AFSC as a way to offer her skills as a nurse to those who needed them. Thanks to her nationality, Resch was able to stay in France after the American contingent was forced to leave the country, and she was able to shepherd Jewish refugee children to safety under the guise of her relief work and the gendered expectations propagated by the Vichy government. While Resch remained reticent on the breadth of her own activities, Wriggins recorded her passion to provide assistance for the Jews in France, no matter the price. See Wriggins, 141.

SOE agents—almost invariably claiming to recount the “true story” of the war’s greatest spies—exist, although few treatments of SOE might be considered scholarly.

A study of foreign women’s involvement in resistance activities in France peels back several layers of what it meant to take part in the French Resistance. First, the slim academic historiography related to women’s participation in the AFSC, CAS and SOE demonstrates that historians and vectors of popular culture will persist in neglecting the notion that women’s everyday actions have radical consequences. That women do what needs to be done, acting where they are in response to what need they perceive, has the potential to be profoundly subversive. This thesis, therefore, aims to broaden the scope of this historiography, through an examination of new sources as well as a re-interpretation of some sources that have received a notable amount of attention but little critical analysis. Second, this study of non-French women’s resistance work uncovers the important role of risk in women’s actions and of their subsequent memory of those actions. Just as for their French counterparts, resistance was for foreign women in France a dangerous choice. For some, like Norwegian Alice Resch, their foreign nationalities offered some protection; for others, their governments disapproved of their activities, in the case of Davenport and Gold, who acted in defiance of the U.S. official political stance—or by nature their governments could not protect them, as in the case of women who served as SOE agents, who when captured treated as foreign spies.¹⁰ These women

¹⁰ Some women’s connections to foreign-based organizations installed in France at the beginning of the Occupation perhaps also contributed to this understanding of risk. A contrasting example lies in the experience of Virginia d’Albert-Lake, an American woman who married a French man and had been living in Paris at the time the war began. Her first foray into resistance was not until 1943, when a local baker introduced her and her husband to the downed American airmen he was sheltering. That introduction led to her involvement with a local resistance movement that helped downed airmen escape

believed that facing danger contributed to their authenticity as resistance workers, since in many of their memoirs they stressed the personal risk of their work.

Finally, foreign women's resistance activities in France during the Occupation have significant implications for the memory work involved in interpreting that experience. The acts of remembering and recording are affected by the politics of nationality and gender, and the relationship between the narrator and the audience. Rita Thalmann has shown that the high numbers of foreign and Jewish women in the French Resistance have contributed to their omission from the historiography and from French national memory, since they were part of minority cultures.¹¹ But Claire Andrieu has argued that because women in France often continued the trajectory of the work and convictions of their pre-war lives, it did not occur to them to ask for public, official recognition. In some cases this perception of continuity has contributed to non-French

France and return to England. In 1944, Virginia d'Albert-Lake was arrested, questioned and sent to Buchenwald. In her memoirs she recorded feeling that her American nationality had allowed her lighter treatment: indeed, her mother in Florida convinced the State Department to broker her release. At the same time, d'Albert-Lake entered into resistance in much the same way that historians have argued that the French did: by acting where they were, by way of subversive everyday acts, especially after November 1942. See Virginia d'Albert-Lake, *An American heroine in the French Resistance: the diary and memoir of Virginia d'Albert-Lake*. Edited by Judy Barrett Litoff (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006).

¹¹ Penny Summerfield, *Reconstructing women's wartime lives: discourse and subjectivity in oral histories of the Second World War* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 23; and Diamond, *Women and the Second World War in France*, 8, 107. Rita Thalmann's research explores "résistance de proximité ou de solidarité." Without going over to open opposition at its extreme, *résistance de proximité* contributed to saving the lives of people and opening the way for new partnerships. See Thalmann quoted in Jacques Fijalkow, *Les femmes dans les années quarante: juives et non-juives, souffrances et résistance: deuxième colloque de Lacaune, 20-21 septembre 2003* (Paris: Editions de Paris, 2004), 35. It is also important not to overlook the gendered relationships within organizations like the American Friends Service Committee and the Emergency Rescue Committee, where men held directorships and women filled supporting roles.

women's exclusion.¹² And yet, at the same time, with evolutions in historiography and public memory, women have come to identify their own responsibility to tell their stories, as a counter to long-held political and cultural myths about resistance. Non-French women who participated in resistance in France were unlike either their French counterparts who sought to liberate France, or the European refugees who sought to escape through French avenues. Whatever their nationality and whatever their organizational affiliation, however, these non-French women chose to contribute to French resistance efforts in ways that put all opponents of the Nazis "all in the same boat."

¹² Andrieu, "Les résistantes, perspectives de recherche," 86-87

Chapter 2

“AND THEN THERE WERE THE CHILDREN”: RESISTANCE AS RELIEF

Alice Resch had been doing relief work in a village in southwestern France the day that Charles de Gaulle appealed over the BBC to his fellow Frenchmen. In the memoir she published decades later, *Over the Highest Mountains: A Memoir of Unexpected Heroism in France During World War II*, Resch remembered listening to the radio on June 18, 1940, and hearing de Gaulle’s call to resistance:

It didn’t strike me at the time just how important this appeal was. I was more interested in the other news: all the main roads were now reserved for military use, no private transportation allowed. I was frightened. Was my connection to Toulouse now broken? Was I to be stranded here alone, a foreigner in France, in wartime?¹

Whether she actually listened to de Gaulle’s radio broadcast—an act many people in the years immediately following the war claimed to have done, but few actually did—may be a question of misremembering in order to place her activities within the context of the French Resistance. Alice Resch remembered the call later on when she recorded her experiences in France during World War II, but she, like many French people, did not initially respond to the appeal by committing to the resistance. Nor was she what General de Gaulle envisioned as a resister, either on the radio in June 1940, or when he suggested

¹ Alice Resch Synnestvedt, *Over the Highest Mountains: A Memoir of Unexpected Heroism in France During World War II*, Translated by Ann Kunish (Pasadena: Intentional Productions, 1998), 63.

after the Liberation that all French people had participated in the French Resistance. For Resch was not French. She had been born in Chicago to Norwegian parents, who soon after Alice's birth moved the family to the small isolated town in Norway where her father became a manager at a manufacturing plant. She wrote, "I sometimes say: 'I began as an American, spent my childhood and youth in Norway, my active adult life and marriage in France, and my old age in Denmark.' But in my heart I am and will always be Norwegian."² She spent the 1940s providing aid to refugees and internees in southern France, especially Jewish children, through the American Friends Service Committee. Sometimes that relief work required clandestine, underground measures that involved resistance activity.

Open participation in resistant activities was not the order of the day, and particularly not for the men and women engaged in the social relief work organized and implemented by a historically pacifist and non-violent branch of the American Protestant Church. Certainly, a pacifist organization like the American Friends Service Committee could never acknowledge links to seemingly dangerous political and militant work. Resch wrote that Helga Holbeck, the director of the Quaker office at Toulouse, advised her and the other women on the staff, 'You have to choose if you want to work for the Quakers or for the resistance. We can't risk compromising our work. If you are discovered, it will be the end of us!'"³ Nevertheless, as Resch chronicled in her memoir the work of the AFSC, the Œuvre de Secours aux Enfants (OSE), and Comité inter-mouvements auprès des évacuées (CIMADE) in the camp at Gurs, it is hard to tell where relief ended and

² Synnestvedt, *Over the Highest Mountains*, 3

³ Ibid, 112

resistance began. One Quaker delegate smuggled four children out of the camp, another twelve, by using their status as relief workers to legitimate their removal of children from Gurs.⁴ In his own memoir of his time with the Quakers in Europe during World War II, Howard Wriggins wrote that Alice Resch and Helga Holbeck both were smuggling food to Jews in hiding and keeping in close contact with the Trocmé family in Chambon-sur-Lignon, a Protestant town in southeastern France that sheltered many Jews from Vichy and Nazi hands.⁵

This chapter will trace the activity of the American Friends Service Committee—relief interwoven with resistance—from the time of the Armistice signed in 1940, until the Liberation in 1944. The women discussed in this chapter joined the American Friends Service Committee in order to assist refugees interned in French camps and to provide aid to Jewish as well as non-Jewish French children. Like Alice Resch, the non-French women who worked for the American Friends Service Committee found themselves in France when the war broke out, and chose to act where they were because, geographically, they could not act in their homelands and, morally, they could not merely bear witness to the effects of the Occupation. They were motivated by humanitarian impulses—not unlike some French people who joined the resistance out of a motivation to defend universal freedoms and rights—that necessitated cooperation with the Vichy government. In fact, some saw resistance as incompatible with relief work, and these women had to choose between the Resistance and the Quakers. Before the German

⁴ Ibid, 116-117

⁵ Howard Wriggins, *Picking up the Pieces from Portugal to Palestine: Quaker Refugee Relief in World War II* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2004), 141.

invasion of the southern zone, the American Quakers attempted to eschew involvement with the Resistance, since they depended on a favorable relationship with Vichy to carry on relief work in camps and towns. Individual Quakers, like Alice Resch, acknowledged the eventual necessity of taking part in resistance activities only after it had become nearly impossible to continue relief work for French and refugee children in complete legality.

Resch's response to the call to resistance was not to engage forthrightly in resistance organized by bands of patriotic men and women, but rather to continue the work that she had been doing with the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) since the beginning of the war. In time, that activity would necessarily involve a relationship with the Resistance and participation in resistance work, especially related to hiding Jewish children who otherwise would have been deported. In the memoir she published fifty years after the end of World War II, Alice Resch diminishes the work she did to save the lives of the Jewish children she rescued. She makes only oblique references to her own participation in the Resistance, saying it was "peripheral." Indeed, she may have understood her resistance work in that way, peripheral to the relief work she continue to take part in over the course of the Occupation. Nevertheless, her "memoir of unexpected heroism," as its subtitle suggests, chronicles a period in her life when the world seemed to lie at her feet even as it was falling apart. It is at once a tale of adventure and great risk, an account of humanitarianism and hospitality, and a record of adhering to the moral code of Friends and transgressing political boundaries of legality and nationality.

The non-French women associated with the AFSC inhabited liminal spaces unknown by French women who participated in resistance activities. To do their work, non-French women living and working in France depended upon their status as non-French citizens as well as their familiarity with France and various languages. The overwhelming majority of those working with the AFSC were not French—although they may have loved their adoptive home—and they remained loyal to and dependent upon their nationalities. For some, like Alice Resch, this meant they could safely remain in France and continue working throughout the duration of the war; for others, this meant they were compelled to return to England or the United States when directed by their home government.

Historians' discussions of non-French women who participated in resistance activities in France have largely been descriptive. Margaret Rossiter's *Women in the Resistance* offers a colorful, fact-filled account of six American and English women "who loved France"; Margaret Collins Weitz in *Sisters in the Resistance* alludes to American, Australian, or other European women who took part in Resistance activities, but her larger argument reduces them to anomalies in the larger narrative of French women's resistance in wartime France. How might historians evaluate the illegal activity underneath the legitimate relief work? Is it anachronistic to label their work in France as resistance, to name it something that Resch and her colleagues may not have openly recognized? What roles did gender and nationality play in the work that women like Alice Resch were able to do in France during this period?

To some extent the historiographical debate reflects an understanding of the paradoxical nature of women's resistance activity in France. Historians since the 1960s

have refuted the initial myth perpetrated by General Charles de Gaulle, who famously claimed in the immediate post-war years that all Frenchmen had resisted the oppression, persecution, and deportation perpetrated by the occupying German regime. Historians have reported that while resisters emerged from all political, religious, social and national milieus, only two percent of “the French adult population” actively participated in resistance work.⁶ At the same time, historiographical shifts in the study of the French Resistance during the period of the Nazi Occupation and the collaborationist Vichy government have included an increasingly broad range of activities and actions within the scope of resistance. Robert Paxton has made clear that not all French people participated in the Resistance inside France; and historians of women and everyday life have argued that everyday activity could have been a manner in which French people did in fact resist, without joining the *maquis* and without necessarily changing their pre-war behavior.

The separation between the continuation of everyday activity and the participation in activity that resisted Vichy or the German occupier, was not always entirely discernible; it was and remains difficult to separate resistance activity and everyday activity when the activity itself does not change.⁷ Early resistance was organized as groups of friends, centered on what people could do where they were. In the North, that meant resistance against the Nazi presence, like the network of individuals associated with the Musée de l’Homme in Paris; in the South that translated into small groups of refugees helping Jews and political refugees flee French authorities and

⁶ Peter Davies, *France and the Second World War: Occupation, Collaboration and Resistance* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 98. See also Robert Paxton, *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972).

⁷ Claire Andrieu, “Les résistantes, perspectives de recherche.” *Le mouvement social* 180, Pour Une Histoire Sociale de la Résistance (July-Sept. 1997): 86.

internment camps.⁸ The German occupation of all of France on November 11, 1942, marked a change in fissiparous resistance activity: Robert Paxton and Rod Kedward both have explained that before that date, fragmentations were commonplace, but that afterwards there emerged a greater sense of collectivity, and a more militant—in a broad, urgent sense—understanding of action. In this way, resistance became a way of life.⁹

Margaret Collins Weitz challenges traditional definitions of resistance which tie it to armed fighting and to intentional organization; she adopts instead an etymologically-based definition stretching back to the Latin roots of the word “resistance”: *sistere*, “to stand fast to a position or principle.”¹⁰ Weitz’s definitional framework provides historiographical direction for placing Quaker relief work within the realm of women’s resistance activity in France, since a commitment to Quaker principles was central to that work. The Quakers had been aiding children in the camps and in cities like Toulouse and Marseille since 1940. This early work would not necessarily count as resistance work, since it was done in cooperation with the Vichy officials. However, as the war continued and as it became increasingly clear that the lives of the children they sought to aid in fact were at stake, the Quakers redoubled their efforts to ensure that their work would continue, no matter how the war evolved. This was not outside the realm of the Resistance, which was, in turn, coalescing at that same time. Rod Kedward has

⁸ Hanna Diamond, *Women and the Second World War in France, 1939-1948: Choice and Constraints* (London: Longman, 1999), 5.

⁹ Davies, *France and the Second World War*, 49, 51, 59; Rod Kedward, *In Search of the Maquis: Rural Resistance in Southern France, 1942-1944* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 80, 247; See also Paxton, *Old Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order, 1940-1944*.

¹⁰ Margaret Collins Weitz, *Sisters in the Resistance: How Women Fought to Free France, 1940-1945* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1995), 8.

argued that the persecution of the Jews reinforced the moral thread of the Resistance, inciting “a humanitarian reaction which transcended religious and political barriers.”¹¹ In this way, a way of life became resistance.

Historians of women have explored the particular role of women in resistance in France. Claire Andrieu discusses the logistical role of women in resistance through resistance *au foyer*, at home, which often included hiding people, an offense for which the French risked deportation. Andrieu argues that to overcome fear of deportation and the discomfort of living with strangers, women had to be driven by something other than a humanitarian feeling—in other words, some kind of engagement with a network of like-minded people or with a value system that complemented resistance.¹² Andrieu suggests that as citizens on the margins of political work, women were also on the margins of the law, and could take advantage of that position in order to perform resistant work.¹³ Margaret Collins Weitz argues that women did not suddenly develop feminist attitudes about the place of women simply from their own resistance experiences: “They simply did ‘what had to be done.’”¹⁴ Weitz has pointed out the paradoxical position of women in France under Vichy, which attempted to convince women to stay home and reproduce as their patriotic duty. Because they were assumed to be weak and literally were legislated as second-class citizens, women could move more clandestinely than men.¹⁵ Indeed, this

¹¹ Kedward, *In Search of the Maquis*, 175

¹² Andrieu, “Les résistantes, perspectives de recherche,” 86

¹³ *Ibid*, 75, 94

¹⁴ Weitz, *Sisters in the Resistance*, 7-8

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 65, 147

assumption would prove useful for Alice Resch and her colleagues who helped remove children from internment camps under the guise of their relief work.

Alice Resch's fear about life in France under Vichy was probably well founded, although she was not personally threatened by the Vichy reaction to the presence of foreign nationals on French soil. Jews from Germany and Austria had arrived in increasing numbers after the November 1938 Nuremberg decrees, Spanish Republicans had arrived in 1939 following the Spanish Civil War, and Poles had arrived in France after campaigns in September 1939.¹⁶ At the time of de Gaulle's appeal to resistance, Henri-Philippe Pétain had just signed the armistice with Germany. The defeat brought France's festering xenophobia to the forefront of French public life, even as political upheaval in neighboring countries continued to force refugees into France. Refugees from northern France, Belgium and Holland arrived in southern France soon after the Germans cut across their homelands. Faced with the German occupier in the northern part of France and the waves of refugees seeking shelters in the southern part, Vichy sought to limit "the non-assimilable... element in French economic and cultural life" by interning foreign enemies that were considered threats to France in what grew to be ninety camps scattered across the country.¹⁷ This period was, in other words, a low point for those concerned about France's historical self-image as a refuge for exiles.

Eventually, the American Friends Service Committee itself could not continue to function openly as an American entity: in late 1942, the everyday administrative duties were transferred to a French organization, Secours Quaker, created explicitly to continue

¹⁶ Paxton, *Vichy France: Old Guard, New Order*, 168-169

¹⁷ Weitz, *Sisters in the Resistance*, 30

Quaker relief work in southern France after the Americans were called back to the United States. In October 1944, Lucien Cornil, president of Secours Quaker, wrote to a U.S. Army colonel to explain the advantages of continued Quaker work in the Marseille area, and to ask for permission for American Quakers to return to France to provide aid. “The American Quakers (American Friends Service Committee) have had wide experience in French relief in eleven departments during the years 1940 to 1942,” he explained.

At the time of the German occupation they were obliged to cease activities. They turned the administration of their relief programs in their four delegations of Marseille, Montauban, Toulouse, and Perpignan over to the French Quakers who have since that time functioned as Secours Quaker.... Their [the American Quakers’] presence would, we feel, cause no inconvenience to the American war effort but on the contrary further the intelligent distribution of relief in regions where help is most needed.¹⁸

This “intelligent distribution of relief” involved legal relief work as well as illegal resistance activity, including cooperating at times with the Vichy government and at times with other organizations attempting to aid and protect Jewish children.

A Quaker tradition of relief

A small group of eleven Quaker men and three Quaker women from different branches of the Religious Society of Friends in the United States met in Philadelphia in 1917 to form the American Friends Service Committee. Faced with the American entry into World War I that year, the group sought to provide the opportunity for conscientious objectors, whether Quaker or not, to do humanitarian work overseas. Grown out of a long-standing institutional and religious commitment to non-violence and social service,

¹⁸ Lucien Cornil to Colonel Henry Parkman, 30 October 1944, folder 2, box 52, American Friends Service Committee records relating to humanitarian work in France, 1933-1950, American Friends Service Committee Archives, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

the American Friends Service Committee sent relief workers first to France to participate in reconstruction work in cooperation with the Civilian Branch of the American Red Cross, and then, in the years leading up to World War II, to other places in Europe, Asia and parts of the United States.¹⁹ Rufus Jones served as the Committee's first chair and characterized its first twenty years of world service as "a fine blending of individual leadership and harmonious corporate action."²⁰ He compared the men and women of the AFSC to Abraham, writing in the foreword of an organizational history written in 1937: "We were conscious of a divine leading, and we were aware, even if only dimly, that we were 'fellow-laborers with God' in the rugged furrows of the somewhat brambly fields of the world."²¹ That organizational history demonstrated, in Jones's mind, the "splendor of unselfish love in the midst of the dark epoch of violence, confusion and hate" between 1917 and 1924.²² By that year, six hundred Quaker workers had organized fifty thousand European volunteers to provide aid to six million people.²³ Early efforts in France,

¹⁹ Lester M. Jones, *Quakers in Actions: Recent Humanitarian and Reform Activities of the American Quakers* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1929), 19-23.

²⁰ Rufus Jones, foreword, *Swords into Ploughshares: An Account of the American Friends Service Committee 1917-1937*, by Mary Hoxie Jones (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1937), ix. In her introduction to the book, Mary Hoxie Jones explains her unusual decision to create a fictitious character that would appear in each chapter. Over the course of the twenty years covered by the *Swords into Ploughshares*, Abby Worthington "represents the enthusiastic and devoted service of the young person, the growing comprehension of the purpose of the Service Committee and the wisdom of mature years couple with a long period of service... She has become... the interpretation of the Service Committee, and the symbol for all the workers..." See Jones, *Swords into Ploughshares*, xviii.

²¹ Rufus Jones, *Swords into Ploughshares*, vii-viii

²² *Ibid*, xi

²³ Lester M. Jones, *Quakers in Actions*, 20

Russia, Poland, Austria and Germany during and immediately following the war sometimes entailed engaging workers who were not Friends, but who shared Quaker commitments to pacifism and service, and who possessed skills that would be helpful to the Committee's work, such as familiarity with Russian, German or French languages and cultures.²⁴

Further, it was important that organizational discussions of even small-scale issues be carried out in accordance with the Quaker tradition that honors unanimity in decision-making. In that vein, the American Friends Service Committee met in Philadelphia in September 1924 to decide the future of the committee's work when war relief was no longer necessary. "Home Service" in the United States, as opposed to the initial work abroad, had begun in April 1920. At the September 1924 meeting, Jones called for a deepening of the committee's work toward interracial harmony and toward the interpretation of its own ideals. By the end of the meeting, through the Quaker process of honoring each individual's opinion in order to reach consensus among those decision-makers present, the Committee turned its attention toward work in the United States, while at the same time dividing its overall scope into four interrelated sections: European, Interracial Service, Peace, and Home Service.²⁵

Quaker work in France continued even after war relief work ended in 1920, and contact between the Philadelphia office and France was sustained as Philadelphia sent two women to the Châlons Maternity Hospital. The Friends' Center in Paris provided a space for intellectual debate, and in 1931 the Service Committee staff there

²⁴ Mary Hoxie Jones, *Swords into Ploughshares*, 6

²⁵ *Ibid*, 31

implemented a relief program for German children in Berlin that fed fifty children each day for a year and a half, until it was no longer possible for the French Quakers to work in Germany. They transferred the project back to Paris, where they established a mutual aid program that provided food and other forms of relief to German refugees from 1933 onward.²⁶

The plight of Spanish Republicans seeking refuge in France after the Spanish Civil War presented the Quakers with the opportunity to expand their work in France. But while it attempted to provide for both physical and spiritual needs, the AFSC was neither the first nor the only foreign-based organization that provided relief to the refugees that poured into southern France.²⁷ More than 300,000 refugees streamed over the Pyrenees in February 1939 and into miserable concentration camps, prompting a humanitarian response from several denominational and non-governmental organizations. At the time, the American Quakers, especially in their office at Toulouse, took their cues from the Comité International d'Aide aux Enfants de France, a French non-governmental organization which had been founded in 1937 to aid displaced children affected by the Spanish Civil War. While the Oeuvre de Secours aux Enfants, a Jewish French humanitarian organization, was the first organization the French government permitted to carry out relief work in the camps, from February 1939 onward, the Quakers were present in internment camps like the one at Gurs, created to house Spanish refugees.

The Quakers were, however, among the first religious groups to react to Vichy's ill treatment of foreign refugees and French Jews. The roundup of Jews at the

²⁶ Ibid, 136-138

²⁷ Lester M. Jones, *Quakers in Action*, 15

Vélodrome d'Hiver in Paris in July 1942 spurred the religious leaders of France to respond. Marc Boegner, the head of the Protestant church in France, protested the actions against the Jews: "No defeat can oblige France to sully her own honor," he wrote to Pétain. The Catholic Church withdrew its support of Vichy and "from pulpits across unoccupied France, Catholics and Protestants were urged to help persecuted Jews in any way they could."²⁸ Others, many non-Jewish, soon followed, and Boegner organized at Nîmes a committee of the non-Jewish religious groups that coordinated activities from October 1940 until March 1943.

The AFSC provided relief and assistance in response to a broad range of needs outside of the internment camps. In the 1930s in Spain and then the 1940s in France, the Quakers established schools and libraries; provided food, clothing, hygiene products, medical equipment, and vitamin supplements; distributed toys; and operated workshops to employ men and women—all of which paralleled the work they did inside the camps.²⁹ Over the winter of 1941-1942, the main activity of the American Quakers consisted of finding and providing food for French and non-French refugees; the need and the service persisted after the Liberation.³⁰ Other projects attempted to rehabilitate refugee adults for employment and to reconstruct towns that had been destroyed. The AFSC organized workshops in which both men and women found occupational training. The exemplar was the Montauban workshop, where mostly Spanish refugees made

²⁸ Erna Paris, *Unhealed Wounds: France and the Klaus Barbie Affair* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1985), 74.

²⁹ "The American Friends in France, 1941-1942," in *Recent Relief Programs of the American Friends in Spain and France*, ed. Donald S. Howard (Philadelphia: Russell Sage Foundation, 1943), 25.

³⁰ "The American Friends in France, 1941-1942," 25

artificial arms and legs; by April 1942 Alice Resch was in charge of the shoe workshop in Toulouse.³¹ Quaker village reconstruction projects began in 1941, in the villages of Penne, Puycelci, and Bourg d'Oueil—developments funded by the French government installed at Vichy.³² “And then,” Alice Resch wrote in her memoir, “there were the children.”³³

By 1942, the AFSC was devoting most of its resources to helping children.³⁴ For twenty weeks in 1941, the AFSC fed 50,000 children in unoccupied France.³⁵ The official report submitted to Philadelphia from the AFSC in France in 1942 reflects a response to a need created by the year’s circumstances: “less food, shabbier clothing, almost no heat, less transportation, increasing ill health, and hardships of all kinds.”³⁶ Two years later, children remained at the heart of the work: in August 1944, Eleanor Cohu cabled Philadelphia from Marseille with an overview about the work they were

³¹ John Wood to Alice Resch, 15 April 1942, folder 17, box 28, American Friends Service Committee records relating to humanitarian work in France, 1933-1950, American Friends Service Committee Archives, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

³² “The American Friends in France, 1941-1942,” 26

³³ Synnestvedt, *Over The Highest Mountains*, 100

³⁴ “The American Friends in France, 1941-1942,” 22. In its report on its activities in 1943 and 1944, the Toulouse delegation noted that since its inception it has focused particularly on children. Indeed, their work included school canteens, a feeding center, sponsorships for children, distribution of milk to children, clothing distribution for adults and children, prison aid, and visits to camps and hospitals. See “Rapport des Activités de la Délégation de Toulouse,” 13 February 1944, folder 21, box 26, American Friends Service Committee records relating to humanitarian work in France, 1933-1950, American Friends Service Committee Archives, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

³⁵ Clarence E. Pickett, *For More Than Bread: An Autobiographical Account of Twenty-two Years' Work with the American Friends Service Committee* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1953), 182.

³⁶ “The American Friends in France, 1941-1942,” 22

able to continue doing in southern France. A feeding center was soon to be expanded by fifty percent and monthly distributions to children in colonies continued, although Cohu predicted that the food reserves would be empty by the end of the following month.³⁷

One of the major food distribution programs the American Friends Service Committee developed was through the schools. A Dane, Helga Holbeck, the delegate in Toulouse, apparently made recommendations in early 1941 for a school feeding program in a letter to Howard Kershner, the director of Quaker programs in France; he responded positively, and furthermore asked Holbeck to approve the transfer of one of her employees from the Toulouse office to fill the delegate post at Montauban, since “if the Americans all leave, we would have no one there to carry on”—a sign that they also were preparing for an uncertain future.³⁸ A week later Kershner wrote again to Holbeck to approve Holbeck’s financial cooperation with other groups that were providing assistance to children. But Kershner revealed some reservations: “We must be careful to assure ourselves as to the character of the organizations dealing with the children and as to the real need of the children. Since this action on our part represents a redistribution of food stocks available in France, we must make sure that we are giving the food to the most needy and the most worthy ones.”³⁹ Beginning in the fall of 1942, the American Quakers

³⁷ Eleanor Cohu to AFSC in Philadelphia, 31 August 1944, folder 8, box 52, American Friends Service Committee records relating to humanitarian work in France, 1933-1950, American Friends Service Committee Archives, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

³⁸ Howard Kerschner to Helga Holbeck, 15 May 1941, folder 3, box 27, American Friends Service Committee records relating to humanitarian work in France, 1933-1950, American Friends Service Committee Archives, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

³⁹ Howard Kerschner to Helga Holbeck, 23 May 1941, folder 3, box 27, American Friends Service Committee records relating to humanitarian work in France, 1933-1950, American Friends Service Committee Archives, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

fed 84,500 children at school canteens in eleven departments. The children were chosen by local authorities, teachers and social workers who identified them as the neediest.⁴⁰

While much of the Quaker relief work benefited refugee children, the AFSC did not assist all children with demonstrated need. Correspondence between Quaker delegates sometimes revealed the relevance of the nationality of the children: sometimes they would or could help only non-French nationals. Most often, however, Quakers described their clients as the “ones with greatest need,” or “the worthiest.” The question of worthiness seemed strictly defined, or at least strictly patrolled. The tone of the official 1943 report back to Philadelphia is overwhelmingly patronizing: about the establishment of home colonies, in which the AFSC provided additional services to children who remained in their own homes with their own parents, the writer reported,

[A]fter careful investigation to make sure that the mothers were intelligent, conscientious and capable of good judgment, a service of this kind was inaugurated. A small amount of food, plus a sum of money, has been taken into these homes by the Committee workers, who talk in a friendly manner with the mother and counsel with her regarding the child’s food and care.⁴¹

The constant task of dispensing as many resources as possible to the greatest number of people with the most need, while spending as little money as possible, meant that each home colony was closely monitored and evaluated.

The Quakers also operated children’s colonies in the countryside, where children would receive relief while under care of the Quaker committee. The project was expensive, so Kershner wrote to Holbeck in April 1940 outlining the work that “we can undertake in our colony programme with some degree of [financial] safety.” He went on

⁴⁰ “The American Friends in France, 1941-1942,” 22

⁴¹ “The American Friends in France, 1941-1942,” 23. This was perhaps also a manifestation of their expectations based on class.

to estimate how many children each colony could handle, based on the cost-per-day to care for each one.⁴² The cost of maintaining the colonies seemed to be a constant worry, reflective perhaps of the relatively small number of children they reached. “Costs have been rising, but thirty-three cents a day still provides full care for one of these children,” an official report to Philadelphia stated.⁴³ After the number of colonies was reduced in 1942, food, clothing and education were provided to 600 children.

At the end of 1940 humanitarian and religious organizations began trying to broker the release of children from internment camps in southern France, but it was not until the following spring that the first children were released—an effort that required cooperation among relief organizations and often resulted in the safe transport of fewer children than the organizers had initially hoped. Alice Resch wrote that her efforts at the Gurs camp and the efforts of her colleagues “to do something for them were a never-ending and complicated puzzle. I received a huge stack of bureaucratic papers to and from the Prefects in Pau, Toulouse and Vichy just to get 48 children out of the camp!”⁴⁴ In many instances, the Quakers were responsible for negotiating the American quota system and obtaining visas for the children who would travel to the United States; they also accompanied the children to the embarkation points.⁴⁵ On May 12, 1942, Resch

⁴² Howard Kerschner to Helga Holbeck, 24 April 1940, folder 2, box 27, American Friends Service Committee records relating to humanitarian work in France, 1933-1950, American Friends Service Committee Archives, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

⁴³ “The American Friends in France, 1941-1942,” 23

⁴⁴ Synnestvedt, *Over The Highest Mountains*, 100-101

⁴⁵ Hillel Kieval, “Legality and Resistance in Vichy France: The Rescue of Jewish Children,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, Vol 124 No. 5 (October 10, 1980), 349-351.

wrote to Quaker delegate Mary Elmes in Perpignan, confirming the arrival of nine children in Toulouse, safely removed from Rivesaltes. “You know that only nine of them came,” she wrote, “but how pleased I am that they really have materialized.”⁴⁶ The two corresponded, in both French and English, over the course of the summer about the wellbeing of the children, as well as the status of parents left behind in the Rivesaltes camp. Together they negotiated packages, documentation, the travel and transfer of several families of children of French and Spanish origins out of camps, and children’s visits into the camp at Le Vernet to see their parents.

Establishing legitimacy, avoiding suspicion: problems of nationhood and gender

Not surprisingly, Quaker workers’ efforts to establish legitimacy with local populations, other AFSC offices and relief organizations, and Vichy officials involved frequent communication and cooperation. Letters often bore unapologetic reminders of the hard work some offices carried out under challenging circumstances—intimating an underlying tension among some that was fueled sometimes by apprehensions regarding the continued situation in France, but more often by defensible indignation regarding parity, both for women with men and among regional offices. In January 1941, Helga Holbeck asked Mary Elmes to present or write a report about her work at the Argèles internment camp for the Nîmes delegation meeting later that month. While she explained that she was on a sub-committee “studying work to be done and division of work in the various camps,” Holbeck wrote, “It would be all wrong if we did not present a report

⁴⁶ Alice Resch to Mary Elmes, 12 May 1942, folder 20, box 28, American Friends Service Committee records relating to humanitarian work in France, 1933-1950, American Friends Service Committee Archives, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

when other people who do much less work present glorious long ones.”⁴⁷ Soon afterward, Holbeck exchanged letters with Gertrude Kershner, Howard Kershner’s wife and colleague in Marseille, about renting properties near Toulouse for children’s colonies. Holbeck evidently disagreed with the Kershners, who recommended opening a colony at Cugnaux, which Holbeck thought was too close to the airport for security. The exchange grew heated when Isabel Needham, a delegate in Marseille, wrote to Holbeck asking for the return of an official AFSC pin, since they were only intended for Philadelphia delegates. Holbeck wrote to Mrs. Kershner, “I do not quite know what a Philadelphia delegate is; we all here have our credentials from Philadelphia, too, and at any rate, I shall send the star back in a few days, but as it is the only one we have here in Toulouse, I feel it is rather important that it is being worn, particularly on official calls to the prefecture, etc.”⁴⁸ The next year Grace Lowery wrote to Holbeck from Montauban on February 13, 1942, apologizing for miscommunications related to another matter. Lowery wrote, “We must work together to accomplish the greatest amount of help for everyone.”⁴⁹ While it was not always easy, most Quaker workers viewed cooperation as necessary and integral to their mission.

⁴⁷ Helga Holbeck to Mary Elmes, 6 January 1941, folder 19, box 28, American Friends Service Committee records relating to humanitarian work in France, 1933-1950, American Friends Service Committee Archives, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

⁴⁸ Helga Holbeck to Gertrude Kerschner, January and February 1941, folder 5, box 27, American Friends Service Committee records relating to humanitarian work in France, 1933-1950, American Friends Service Committee Archives, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

⁴⁹ Grace Lowery to Helga Holbeck, 13 February 1942, folder 17, box 28, American Friends Service Committee records relating to humanitarian work in France, 1933-1950, American Friends Service Committee Archives, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Working together appeared to have been thwarted, in part, by frictions fueled by issues of gender. As was often the case, women were very active at the local level, but that participation was not well represented at the higher administrative levels. In September 1940, Howard Kershner was appointed to direct the American Quakers in France from the Marseille office, which acted as the link between the AFSC delegations in southern France and the American headquarters in Philadelphia, as well as the delegations and the American embassy in Marseille.⁵⁰ Kershner was somewhat of an anomaly: most of the delegates and other Quaker workers were women. He frequently corresponded with Helga Holbeck in Toulouse for advice, and for the most part, the correspondence between the two appears to be cordial, although she pointedly summarized some differences of opinion in a letter she wrote to him on February 10, 1942.⁵¹ Although she addressed aggressive letters to Kershner's wife and other colleagues in Marseille, she rarely expressed her frustration directly to him. The margins, however, of some surviving letters from Kershner to Holbeck are scribbled with Holbeck's spontaneous and often critical thoughts. Holbeck's more demure manner with Howard Kershner might also be attributed to the power relationship between the two, as well as to the gendered expectations of men and women at the time.

More broadly, Quaker relief work in southern France played out against the backdrop of long assumed expectations of gender norms that were gaining new juridical ground with the administration at Vichy. Pétain and the pro-collaborationist government

⁵⁰ Synnestvedt, *Over the Highest Mountains*, 79

⁵¹ Helga Holbeck to Howard Kerschner, 10 February 1942, folder 84, box 56, American Friends Service Committee records relating to humanitarian work in France, 1933-1950, American Friends Service Committee Archives, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

depended particularly upon the family as part of its three-tiered program—along with *travail* and *patrie*—to restore order to French society in turmoil.⁵² Francine Muel-Dreyfus has discussed Vichy’s implementation of the latent, pervasive values of what she terms the “Eternal Feminine,” by brokering “a return to a biological basis for essential inequalities” and valorizing what she calls a culture of sacrifice.⁵³ She argues that Pétain voiced in Vichy propaganda and codified in Vichy regulations long-held, conservative beliefs with regards to women and gender. The AFSC turned this retrogressive expectations to their advantage: Quaker efforts that focused on the well being of children complemented pro-family and pro-natal propaganda, which in turn may have made it easier to translate that work into underground activity when necessary. Women were expected to care for children, and the relief work provided the legal cover for illicit actions that helped Jewish children escape deportation.⁵⁴

It was in this French cultural context that women, along with some men, of the AFSC carried out their work, many of them outside of their own national contexts. In early 1942, fifteen Americans and 150 European volunteers composed the main

⁵² Miranda Pollard, *Reign of Virtue: Mobilizing Gender in Vichy France* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 4.

⁵³ Francine Muel-Dreyfus, *Vichy and the Eternal Feminine: A Contribution to a Political Sociology of Gender*, trans. Kathleen A. Johnson (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2001), 10-11.

⁵⁴ Claire Andrieu’s profile of French women who participated in resistance activities draws clear connections between family, morality, and resistance. She argues that women were more likely to engage politically over questions of morality than “*considérations corporatives*.” She cites a UNESCO study that found that women (and men) both were more likely to be politically engaged if they had a family. Motherhood, marriage and old age did not obstruct engagement, although obviously not all mothers were *résistantes* and not all *résistantes* were mothers. See Andrieu, “Les résistantes, perspectives de recherche,” 78-79, 84; and Margaret Paton-Walsh, *Our War Too: American Women Against the Axis* (Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 2002), 94.

workforce for the Committee; by September 1942, the list of the central staff of the American Friends Service Committee in southern France included eight Americans, two French, two Danish, two Irish, two Norwegians, two Dutch, and one Estonian.⁵⁵ In October 1941, Howard Kershner wrote to Holbeck with the news that he was sending a man named Henry Harvey to oversee the reconstruction program in Toulouse. While he allowed that Holbeck would be in charge over the collaboration, Kershner asked Harvey, Holbeck and another colleague to work cooperatively. We can presume that it was Holbeck who annotated that paragraph of the letter in a decidedly disgruntled tone, “With pleasure, as soon as he has learnt to speak French and to take necessary responsibilities!”⁵⁶ Correspondence among delegates, volunteers, and directors was sometimes in English, sometimes in French; Alice Resch or Helga Holbeck might send one letter in one language, then the next in another. As had been the case in previous Quaker missions abroad, familiarity with several languages and with the country was nearly as important to providing aid as was adherence to Quaker principles.

Alice Resch was not an unusual example of the Europeans who worked with the American Friends Service Committee in France during the war. Raised in a multilingual home and encouraged to forge her own way in the world, Resch arrived in France in the late 1920s, a friendly, well-educated, single young woman who was comfortable facing unexpected possibilities. After graduating from high school in

⁵⁵ Pickett, *For More Than Bread*, 183. See also “Roster,” 25 September 1942, folder 40, box 52, American Friends Service Committee records relating to humanitarian work in France, 1933-1950, American Friends Service Committee Archives, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

⁵⁶ Howard Kerschner to Helga Holbeck, 13 October 1941, folder 3, box 27, American Friends Service Committee records relating to humanitarian work in France, 1933-1950, American Friends Service Committee Archives, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Norway, Resch went abroad for some time, first taking classes at a university in Austria and then moving to Paris, where she shared a room with a Danish woman who had been a nursing student at the American Hospital. On an apparent whim, Resch went to the hospital to inquire about nursing school; she spent the next three years, from February 1929 until 1932, training to be a nurse and graduated with compliments about her temperament and endurance.⁵⁷ By 1938, the American Hospital was registering private nurses who might be interested in working during wartime if necessary; early in the following year the hospital summoned her and she spent the next months working as a nurse in Normandy and Paris. Soon afterwards, an English friend, Anne Crawshay, invited Resch to help refugees from Alsace-Lorraine. Crawshay then joined up with Toot Bleuland van Oordt, Howard Kershner, the Comité International d'Aide aux Enfants de France, and the Quakers; and in late 1939 Anne Crawshay asked Alice Resch to help a doctor who was working with refugees in the department of Indre.⁵⁸

With the Quakers Alice Resch would take full advantage of her abilities to speak several languages and to provide medical care; she would forge life-long friendships and save the lives of the Jewish children she would hide in southwestern France. Though she may have professed to feel otherwise, she was neither stranded nor alone. But her loyalties to Norway remained ardent. Resch was already busy working in southern France when the Germans invaded Scandinavia in April 1940. Heartbroken, she wrote to Norwegian aid organizations to offer help. The response was, "Continue where

⁵⁷ Synnestvedt, *Over the Highest Mountains*, 15

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 38-43

you are.”⁵⁹ And she did. The next month, Anne Crawshay sent Resch down to the southwest part of France, to Agen, to work with the refugees there. Because she could speak German and French, Alice Resch was charged with persuading refugees from northern France and Belgium to give up their vehicles to the aid agency, which could use them to transport food and other supplies.⁶⁰ Soon afterward, Resch met Helga Holbeck, a wealthy Danish woman at work with the Comité International in Toulouse. After Anne Crawshay was called back to England, Resch continued to work in Agen before joining Holbeck in Toulouse. In June 1940, Alice signed on officially with the Quakers and the American Friends Service Committee at work in the unoccupied zone, first stocking food and taking care of the accounts at a food distribution center.

Nearly a year later, Howard Kershner sent Helga Holbeck an AFSC pin for Alice Resch—a visible, tangible sign that she was part of the committee’s work.⁶¹ In early 1942, Helga Holbeck wrote to Grace Lowry at the Quaker office in Montauban, expressing the need to install a delegate at the Gurs camps who could speak German; eventually Alice Resch would spend six months in Gurs.⁶² Alice remembered later, “It was a self-contained society, full of all sorts of people with good and bad characteristics... It wasn’t difficult to be popular, but perhaps that was because I

⁵⁹ Ibid, 49

⁶⁰ Ibid, 51-54

⁶¹ Howard Kershner to Helga Holbeck, 15 May 1941

⁶² Helga Holbeck to Grace Lowery, 16 February 1942, folder 17, box 28, American Friends Service Committee records relating to humanitarian work in France, 1933-1950, American Friends Service Committee Archives, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

represented an organization that provided something everyone needed—namely, food.”⁶³ Resch identified with the Committee and its work, despite the fact that she was neither American nor Quaker. She remained in the Toulouse environs, working with the Quakers and their partners until 1948.⁶⁴

The diversity among the AFSC staff and volunteers proved favorable to implementing relief work, as well as to continuing that work as the war progressed and the protection of certain foreign nationalities became increasingly precarious. In October 1940, Howard Kershner in Marseille wrote to Helga Holbeck in Toulouse, asking for her thoughts on “the best course of action in the event that it became necessary for the American delegates to go home.” The three options he presented involved Danish, Norwegian, Dutch and Swiss delegates carrying on the work, as individuals or under the auspices of the Service Civil or the French Friends.⁶⁵ At the time that diplomatic relations between the United States and France were suspended in November 1942, eight AFSC representatives remained in France. They were detained at Baden-Baden by the Germans, leaving the committee’s work “in the hands of a small international group of workers.”⁶⁶

⁶³ Synnestvedt, *Over the Highest Mountains*, 149

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 63-69

⁶⁵ Howard Kerschner to Helga Holbeck, 28 October 1940, folder 2, box 27, American Friends Service Committee records relating to humanitarian work in France, 1933-1950, American Friends Service Committee Archives, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

⁶⁶ Pickett, *For More Than Bread*, 183.

Turning relief into resistance

The American Friends Service Committee may have welcomed a diverse group of Europeans to participate in their relief work, but adherence to Quaker principles was paramount, no matter the background of the individuals who carried on the work begun by the American Quakers. The report of Quaker activities in the unoccupied zone in 1941 and 1942 emphasized the organization's attempt to abide by the Quaker ideal of democracy: The writer offered quarterly delegate meetings as evidence of that application of "collective wisdom."⁶⁷ In addition, the delegates who served in each regional office selected others who might join the AFSC in its work—a practice that continued with the administrative change of the name.⁶⁸ A note to a M. Gulliny in Montauban, dated November 13, 1942—in other words, just days after Germany occupied the southern zone—invited him to become a delegate of the Secours Quaker.

Adherence to Quaker principles seemed even more important after November 1942, when American Quakers could no longer remain in France to oversee the Committee's activities. A handwritten note scrawled across the bottom of Gulliny's invitations reads: "Fin de l'A.F.S.C/ Commencement du Secours Quaker."⁶⁹ By

⁶⁷ "The American Friends in France, 1941-1942," 27

⁶⁸ Alice Resch, for example, wrote to Céline Rott in Montauban to recommend a former teacher from the American Hospital. She described her as "honest as the day is long, very conscientious and a good organizer," and pointed out that she spoke English and French and had some knowledge of Spanish. Alice Resch to Céline Rott, 9 June 1940, folder 17, box 28, American Friends Service Committee records relating to humanitarian work in France, 1933-1950, American Friends Service Committee Archives, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

⁶⁹ Letter to Guilliny, 13 November 1942, folder 17, box 28, American Friends Service Committee records relating to humanitarian work in France, 1933-1950, American Friends Service Committee Archives, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

December 1942, the American Friends Service Committee ceased entirely to exist administratively and the work, supplies and funds were transferred to the Secours Quaker, the committee organized in advance, in case the Americans had to leave France. Secours Quaker was duly enrolled with the government as an official French committee, and the work continued as before, with most of the same European delegates and volunteers who had worked with the American staff.

At what appears to be the first meeting of the Administrative Committee of the Secours Quaker, which convened on December 19, 1942, it was recorded in the minutes that the former AFSC delegates present at the meeting exhorted the committee to remain committed to the Quaker principles that had guided the work of the previous two years.⁷⁰ Relief workers continued to abide by this wish, or at least to communicate their compliance in official correspondence. A letter from Eleanor Cohu in Marseille to the Toulouse delegation in October 1943 discusses the merger with the Quakers de Paris as assurance that the work of the Secours Quaker would remain in Quaker hands.⁷¹ Further, a declaration made in 1943 by Ernest le Roy, the delegate from the French Quaker assembly, emphasized the need for the Secours Quaker to remain in obedience to Quaker principles and in accordance with French law.⁷² It appears it was necessary at that time to

⁷⁰ "Minutes," 19 December 1942, folder 41, box 30, American Friends Service Committee records relating to humanitarian work in France, 1933-1950, American Friends Service Committee Archives, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

⁷¹ Eleanor Cohu to AFSC delegation at Toulouse, 22 October 1943, folder 14, box 28, American Friends Service Committee records relating to humanitarian work in France, 1933-1950, American Friends Service Committee Archives, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

⁷² Ernest le Roy, "Declaration," 1943, folder 13, box 28, American Friends Service Committee records relating to humanitarian work in France, 1933-1950, American Friends Service Committee Archives, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

remind workers about both points, although the first caution was less difficult, and perhaps less complicated, to heed than the second.

The work helping children in the camps was not illegal; in fact, nearly all of the relief work was, by necessity, carried out in cooperation with Vichy officials.⁷³ In September 1940, Marshal Pétain addressed a letter to relief organizations at work in southern France, asking them to sustain or increase their work.⁷⁴ The next month, Howard Kershner received a letter labeled “very urgent” that outlined the types of exchanges permitted by the Prefects between the free and occupied zone, as well as the manner in which things might pass—in other words, where the customs offices were located, and how exports would be compensated.⁷⁵ In those first few months, despite the bureaucratic red tape that often slowed processes of providing food and clothing, Vichy officials seemed cognizant of the relief work carried out by the American Friends Service Committee. A letter from the Minister of the Interior at Vichy asked Toot Bleuland van Oordt in Toulouse to tell the AFSC “how much I appreciate their kind and humanitarian activity” in the Vernet camp.⁷⁶

Communication also moved in the opposite direction. Delegates often wrote letters to Vichy or municipal officials recommending people for necessary paperwork,

⁷³ Kieval, 350

⁷⁴ Pickett, *For More Than Bread*, 172

⁷⁵ Unsigned letter to Howard Kerschner, 23 October 1940, folder 50, box 52, American Friends Service Committee records relating to humanitarian work in France, 1933-1950, American Friends Service Committee Archives, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

⁷⁶ In a sense, the AFSC “relieved” the Vichy government of the burden. Minister of the Interior to Toot Bleuland van Oordt, 21 September 1940, folder 85, box 56. American Friends Service Committee records relating to humanitarian work in France, 1933-1950, American Friends Service Committee Archives, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

asking for additional aid, or explaining the kind of help the Quakers offered. Holbeck wrote to Kershner in October 1940 about a meeting she had with the Prefect in Toulouse. She reported, “The Prefect was very pleased with our scheme for school canteens and other work for French people, and invited us for a closer cooperation with his services. He also asked me to see his wife who is organizing the local ‘gouttes de lait!’”⁷⁷ On June 10, 1941, Alice Resch wrote to Mme. Pilhiol at the Secours National, the administrative umbrella organization for many relief agencies operating in France, to ask her to intercede on behalf of a family that had been malnourished for quite a while but whom the Quakers could not accommodate.⁷⁸ She wrote again on November 20, 1942 to ask for assistance in helping another family. For these transactions at the time, cooperation with the government in power was essential to ensure that assistance arrived to those who needed it.

The deportations of Jews in France that began in the summer of 1942 altered the work of many relief organizations that largely had operated in accordance with the policies and regulations set out by Vichy. In his 1980 article, “Legality and Resistance in Vichy France: The Rescue of Jewish Children,” Hillel J. Kieval suggested that it was only once it became clear that women and children were at risk for deportation that Jewish aid organizations began to reject working in total legality.⁷⁹ And yet, in the wake

⁷⁷ Helga Holbeck to Howard Kerschner, 3 October 1940, folder 84, box 56, American Friends Service Committee records relating to humanitarian work in France, 1933-1950, American Friends Service Committee Archives, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

⁷⁸ Alice Resch to Mme. Pilhiol, 10 June 1941, folder 57, box 30, American Friends Service Committee records relating to humanitarian work in France, 1933-1950, American Friends Service Committee Archives, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

⁷⁹ Kieval, “Legality and Resistance in Vichy France,” 365

of the Nazi invasion of the southern zone, “subterfuge existed alongside openness as a necessary evil, a choice of last resort.... [Underground methods] were not meant to replace long-standing modes of operation, but merely to supplement them.”⁸⁰ This appears to have been the case with the American Quakers. Underneath their relief work on behalf of interned, refugee, and Jewish children, lay their clandestine efforts in the interests of those same populations.

In her memoir, Alice Resch records the extent to which she and her Quaker colleagues worked with “a strong sense of solidarity” with other relief organizations. If one organization was approached to hide a child but had no means to do so, or if “the situation got too hot,” another group would intervene and take care of the children.⁸¹ Resch describes her own attempts to shepherd out and hide Jewish children, starting in 1942 with the hiding of a young boy whose parents had been arrested in St. Giron, in Ariège, near the Spanish border. AFSC workers carried out underground work often through the connections made as a legal relief organization, but not in their capacity as AFSC workers. Resch wrote:

From that time until the liberation, we worked almost daily, hiding both adults and children and securing false identity papers and ration cards. But all this was done on the sly, even among us in the office. We were a neutral, non-political organization after all, and foreigners to boot. We had to be very, very careful not to compromise our work in the camps and for the French children.⁸²

⁸⁰ Ibid, 359

⁸¹ Synnestvedt, *Over The Highest Mountains*, 118

⁸² Ibid, 127-128

Alice Resch alludes to being frequently involved in this kind of activity, this “people-smuggling,” and notes that she was lucky to do it “without being discovered.”⁸³ However, in August 1945, she wrote a revealing letter to her parents, who were still in Norway:

We were also in the middle of all that was going on—not officially, though—as Quakers, we had to appear to be neutral. Had it been discovered that the Quakers were doing anything that didn’t bear the light of day, all our work would have been put at risk, and our work was truly necessary for all the starving children in the south of France, especially in concentration camps and prisons... But we did other things—under the table.⁸⁴

Even as Resch and her colleagues took part in underground activities as individuals, the need to “appear” neutral was crucial to continuing to help the children collectively.

For the most part, Resch remains reticent in her memoirs about her own participation in resistance, although what she does say implies that she was more involved than she explicitly states. This reserve is perhaps not surprising, since historians of women, and in particular oral historians of women, have pointed out that women are more likely than their male counterparts to overlook their own individual participation in significant collective events.⁸⁵ Moreover, and perhaps more simply, Resch dedicated her memoir to Helga Holbeck, the American Quaker who supervised much of Resch’s work in Toulouse and its environs. Given that dedication acknowledging the important role Holbeck played in Resch’s life both during and after the war, Resch could not first recount Holbeck’s warning—that the women in Resch’s position had to choose between relief work with the Quakers and resistance work—and then overtly outline her own

⁸³ Ibid, 129

⁸⁴ Ibid, 241-242

⁸⁵ Joan Sangster, “Telling Our Stories: Feminist Debates and the Use of Oral History,” *The Oral History Reader*, ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (New York: Routledge, 1998), 89.

exploits in the Resistance. Such a memorial act would have flown in the face of the ideological principles behind the work that united the two women, and of the friendship between them.

Throughout her memoir, Alice Resch blurs the line between humanitarian work and resistance work. But she also makes clear what historians Margaret Collins Weitz and Maggie Allison point out: women were often camouflaged by their very femininity and the expectation that women did not get involved in political questions. Resch's work in the concentration camps in southwestern France was civil, non-violent and public. Trained as a nurse, Resch was taught to provide care to ailing people, an activity she pursued throughout the war. That type of continuity helps explain the route she took to resistance: relief led directly to resistance, without substantially changing the actual activities themselves. To imagine her continued work with the Quakers on the inside of the camps as her "normal" gendered role as a caretaker and nurturer is to interpret her moral and, indeed, militant act of hiding Jewish children as participation in resistance. For Resch and her colleagues in the American Friends Service Committee, it was precisely the commitment to Quaker principles that required them to continue working with and for the children, activities that necessitated a relationship with members of the resistance and thus participation in it. As a result of a steadfast commitment to stand with "nobody's nothings," or the neediest children, the Americans and Europeans who worked with the Quakers in France navigated issues of nationality and gender to establish their legitimacy in France, to sustain their work, and to resist the political and social forces that made their relief work uniquely relevant to the task at hand.

Chapter 3

A GOOD AMERICAN NAME AND THE GOLD LIST: RESISTANCE AS RESCUE

Varian Fry left New York for Marseille in August 1940. A newly formed entity in New York, the Emergency Rescue Committee, had commissioned Fry, a young American journalist, to gather as much information as possible about the current situation of refugees in France and to provide assistance to a particular group of refugee intelligentsia, enumerated in a list he carried with him. At about the same time, the Université de Paris had been unable to let Miriam Davenport, a young American graduate student, sit for her graduate exams in art, so she joined the flow of displaced people, heading first to Toulouse, hoping to sit for exams there, and then to refugee-filled Marseille, hoping to obtain the necessary documentation to be able to join her fiancé in Yugoslavia. One of Davenport's friends in Marseille was a refugee and client of Fry's office, the Centre Américain de Secours, a name less suspicious than a mere translation of the American appellation; in a moment of great need but also great fear for his safety, the friend asked Davenport to go to Fry on his behalf. She went, and Fry hired her to work for the new committee. She stayed for twelve weeks, until the American Embassy renewed her passport for travel to Yugoslavia. Fry would remain in Marseille for almost two years.

Sometime during the first twelve weeks of the Committee's work in Marseille, someone photographed Davenport and Fry at work, probably for a publicity or fundraising campaign. In the photograph, the two Americans are standing over a desk littered with papers, and the two seem engrossed with a document Davenport is showing to Fry. A harsh, dramatic light illuminates their faces: Fry appears stoic and single-minded and Davenport appears thoughtful and good-humored, as those who knew them often described them. Davenport's cheeks are swollen, remnants of badly needed dental work that Fry financed. This photograph has appeared in nearly every biography, history or exhibition related to the work of the Emergency Rescue Committee (Centre Américain de Secours). The photograph's ubiquity is as revealing as its content, and raises questions about the work of the Committee in particular and resistance groups in France at the time in general, as well as about the memory of resistance work in France.

This chapter will address the questions evoked by two of the American women who worked for Varian Fry's committee. Miriam Davenport and her friend Mary Jayne Gold were two of the many agitated people who clogged Marseille's streets in the months after the signing of the armistice with Germany. Most of these people, in danger of losing their lives, languished as they waited for a way to escape Hitler's grasp; Davenport and Gold, less imperiled, sought a way to help anti-Fascist and other refugees as they in turn waited for a way to go home to the United States. Mary Jayne Gold and Miriam Davenport left their respective homes in Paris, and sought escape first through Toulouse and then through Marseille, where together and individually they became valuable members of the Centre Américain de Secours. Their stories as non-French women, and their ability to establish a network of friends and business associates that

would prove useful to their work, illuminate the impact of women in resistance activities in France. What role did they play in the work of the Centre Américain de Secours? How did their status as non-French citizens determine the kinds of activity in which they participated? How did they resist as individuals, and how did their relationships with each other, with France and with the United States, affect the work they did with the Committee? What was the relationship between rescue work and resistance, and how did that relationship affect their everyday lives? How did their lives, in turn, affect their participation in rescue and resistance work? The relationship of the rescue work and the resistance work sustained both projects as well as determined the commemoration in the United States of those involved in the Emergency Rescue Committee in France. The very human relationships among the staff in Marseille, in turn, made possible the committee's rescue and resistance work, and ultimately sustained the legacy of that work in the decades that have followed.

The photograph of Fry and Davenport represents the early period of the Committee's work in Marseille, when it was first providing assistance to political and cultural refugees trapped in France. It also helps reveal the similarities and differences between Fry and Davenport. Fry arrived in France in 1940 with only an American passport, a suitcase of Brooks Brothers suits, a packet of money taped to his leg, and a list of artists and intellectuals in need of assistance; Davenport had arrived in France two years earlier, determined to pursue a graduate degree that would allow her to care for her younger brother after the recent deaths of their parents. Fry's tenure at the Committee's helm in France provided some semblance of protection from an American agency; Davenport's friendship with another American in southern France, Mary Jayne Gold,

provided financial assistance and Fry's successor. In two years, Fry personally reviewed tens of thousands of applications for aid; in twelve weeks, Davenport personally interviewed Surrealist leader André Breton and other artists seeking assistance and escape. After his return to the United States, Fry continued to work on behalf of European refugees and then taught Latin; after her return to the United States, Davenport continued to work on behalf of European refugees and then taught French literature. Fry was the first American recognized by Yad Vashem as a Righteous Among the Nations; Davenport provided essential information for that recognition and for the exhibit about the Committee at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C.

Historians of French women's lives during World War II have attempted to re-interpret the scope of their activities in the Resistance. Based on a descriptive study of women in the Resistance, Margaret Rossiter outlined the scope of women's acts of resistance, from carrying messages and couriers, organizing sabotage, aiding downed airmen, and participating in guerrilla terrorist activities.¹ Some have argued that women's particular role as liaison and messenger was more dangerous than the women themselves recognized, either then or in the present day.² Other historians of women in the Resistance have noted the proliferation of women as effective liaisons and messengers since the German and French police were purportedly less suspicious of women: running errands was part of women's normal activity. Historian Claire Andrieu has pointed out that this suggestion would be hard to prove since the nature of the work required that the

¹ Margaret Rossiter, *Women in the Resistance* (New York: Praeger, 1986), 189.

² Margaret Collins Weitz, *Sisters in the Resistance: How Women Fought to Free France, 1940-1945* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1995), 77.

women leave no trace.³ These women had a connectional role that depended on the ability to call on a network of contacts. It was a role that both Miriam Davenport and Mary Jayne Gold fulfilled for the Emergency Rescue Committee (Centre Américain de Secours) in Marseille, and that sustained the legacy of their work after the war. Even Davenport's friendship with Gold proved propitious, since Fry trusted Gold in part because of her relationship with Davenport, and Gold would become a significant financial contributor. Moreover, the two women's continued friendship into the 1990s allowed them to provide documentation to the United States Holocaust Museum at the time of its development of an exhibit on the Committee and Fry.

Henry Rousso has described World War II as “an ideological war”: the seemingly dichotomous relationships that existed in France also simmered dangerously in other parts of the world, resulting in “worldwide divisions born of the confrontations between the century's three great political systems: Fascism/Nazism, Communism, representative democracy.”⁴ The factious relationships, however, were not necessarily clear-cut, nor were the effects of the war immediately apparent in the lives of people living in France. The Occupation blurred the lines between home front and war front, between civil society and armed forces. It also tested traditional definitions of masculine and feminine behavior. Female stereotypes had long existed in much the same way that they have existed in other Western civilizations; Vichy took advantage of those stereotypes in a major thread of its propaganda couched in duties of motherhood, but so

³ Claire Andrieu, “Les résistantes, perspectives de recherche.” *Le mouvement social* 180, Pour Une Histoire Sociale de la Résistance (July-Sept. 1997): 84.

⁴ Henri Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1991), 8.

too did women living in France use them during the experience of the Occupation in order to survive. Those stereotypes—both positive and negative stereotypes, of a model housewife and a counter-model prostitute—made it both difficult to get beyond stereotypes and possible to temporarily challenge male domination.⁵

Pétain became the leader of the French government at Vichy, legally invested with power that seemed legitimated on an international level when the United States government sent Admiral William Leahy to serve as American ambassador. From 1940 until the summer of 1942, resistance to the new order was the act of a minority of those living in France, and the armistice between France and Germany bound French authorities to prohibit their citizens from fighting the Germans.⁶ Article 19 of the armistice required the French to “surrender on demand” all Germans named by the German government. This threat to the right of asylum in France appalled the American Friends of German Freedom, a committee that gathered at a hotel in New York City for a luncheon on June 25, 1940 to ask a select group of people to fund the rescue of anti-Nazi underground workers in Germany. Those gathered, including Varian Fry, “believed that democrats must help democrats, regardless of nationality”; many guests were upset by France’s recent fall and the particular plight of anti-Nazi artists and intellectuals trapped there, as well as by the provisions of the Armistice’s Article 19. By the end of the afternoon, \$3,000 had been raised and a new committee had taken shape: the Emergency

⁵ Luc Capdevila, François Rouquet, Paula Schwartz, Fabrice Virgili and Danièle Voldman, “‘Quite Simply, Colonel...’: Gender and the Second World War,” in *Vichy, Resistance, Liberation: New Perspectives on Wartime France*, edited Hanna Diamond and Simon Kitson (Oxford; New York: Berg, 2005), 53-55.

⁶ Weitz, *Sisters in the Resistance*, 26, 59

Rescue Committee formed, in Fry's words, "to bring political and intellectual refugees out of France before the Gestapo and the Ovla and the Seguridad got them."⁷

Knowing that the refugees would need help avoiding internment and negotiating the arduous process of procuring exit and travel visas, the Committee decided to send a representative to France in order to rescue the most prominent intellectual and cultural refugees.⁸ Spurred by memories of the pogroms he had witnessed while a journalist on assignment in Germany, Varian Fry offered to go, despite his own inexperience with rescue work, if no one else stepped forward. Fry had studied classics at Harvard and had worked in newspapers up until he left for France; he took a leave of absence in August 1940 from editing for the Foreign Policy Association, a New York-based non-profit organization dedicated to education about world issues. As a reporter he had spent time in Spain during the Civil War, and he could speak French and German, so the experience was not wholly unimaginable for him. His appearance and personality were suitable for the part of the leader of American relief agency: impeccably dressed to suggest that he was above reproach, stubborn, and driven by "a profound belief in liberty

⁷ Varian Fry, *Surrender on Demand*, third edition (Boulder: Johnson Books, 1997), xii. See also Mary Jayne Gold, *Crossroads Marseilles, 1940* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980), xi-xii; and Vickie Caron, *Uneasy Asylum: France and the Jewish Refugee Crisis*, Stanford Studies in Jewish History and Culture (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999). Since the American Friends of German Freedom initially had sought aid for German resistance workers, Fry purportedly believed he was representing the interests of both the ERC and the AFGF, and consequently was supposed to rescue not only the prominent thinkers and artists named by the Emergency Rescue Committee, but also the "uncelebrated political activists," as Fry described them, supported by the American Friends of German Freedom.

⁸ Gold, *Crossroads Marseilles*, xiv

and the dignity of man.”⁹ Finding no better candidate, the Committee hired him as its European Director.

While Fry was preparing to leave for Marseille, a handful of political groups as well as the Museum of Modern Art and the New School for Social Research were compiling a list of two hundred well-known artists and thinkers for Fry to track down. In the meantime, the American Federation of Labor sent Frank Bohn to France a few weeks before Fry left, to provide assistance to labor leaders.¹⁰ On August 3, 1940, the executive secretary of the Emergency Rescue Committee, Mildred Adams, addressed a letter to Fry, outlining the duties and responsibilities they expected of him as their representative in Europe, and acknowledged the probable necessity of exercising his own best judgment while there. He was charged with observing the conditions in which refugees lived and what relief they needed; locating and aiding individuals specifically named on a list provided by the Committee; and recommending other people who might serve as other agents in Lisbon, Toulouse and Marseille. Fry was to go first to Lisbon and then to Marseille and other cities in unoccupied France. In Lisbon Fry was to judge the Portuguese government’s response to using the country as a passageway for refugees on the way to the Western hemisphere, and establish relationships with U.S. government officials and religious relief agencies.

In Marseille Fry was to work closely with the American Consul in the interest of the welfare of the people on his list; though Adams allowed, “how much you tell him,

⁹ Miriam Davenport Ebel, “An Unsentimental Education,” TMs, p. 22, Records Relating to the Development of “Assignment Rescue” (1993-1995), Office of Exhibitions, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Institutional Archives, Linthicum, Maryland; and Gold, *Crossroads Marseilles*, xvii.

¹⁰ Gold, *Crossroads Marseilles*, xvi

and what degree of cooperation can be established between, is a matter left to your discretion.” He was to work closely with Bohn, look into transportation for refugees, especially by boat, and gather information about the internment camps scattered across southern France. In all, he was supposed to spend a little more than three weeks on this European reconnaissance mission in Portugal and France, leaving New York on August 4, 1940, and returning on August 29.¹¹

This was a tall order, and from the minute he arrived in Marseille Fry used his own discretion to a greater extent than his commissioners probably had intended. He translated the Committee’s name into “Centre Américain de Secours,” hoping that it would not betray the illegal activities that had begun to take place in order to in fact “rescue” its clients. But Fry encountered more obstacles from American officials in France than he had expected: in late August, the ERC reported to First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt that the U.S. Visa Office had instructed the American Consulate in Marseille not to grant visas to refugees who could not produce a French exit visa.¹² Despite the

¹¹ Mildred Adams to Varian Fry, 3 August 1940, “Duties, Marseille” folder, box 8, Varian Fry Papers, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University in the City of New York.

¹² In the 1930s and 1940s the United States State Department unwaveringly prevented refugees from entering the country, but established no substantial refugee policy, only adapted previous immigration policies. Growing immigration at the turn of the century had fed anti-immigration sentiment and restrictions had tightened immigration policy in the twentieth century. The addition of a literacy test to gain admission in 1917, and new quota statutes in 1921 and 1924, set the tone for refugee statutes in the 1930s. Into the 1920s U.S. immigration policy continued to assume that people immigrated to the United States for economic reasons. See Roger Daniels, “American Refugee Policy in Historical Perspective,” in *The Muses Flee Hitler*, ed. Jarrell C. Jackman and Carla M. Borden (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1983), 67-68. For a concise overview of the intentions and difficulties of issuing special emergency visitor visas for political refugees, see David S. Wyman, *Paper Walls: Americans and the Refugee Crisis, 1938-1941* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1968), 139-142.

warnings of the U.S. State Department—which threatened to formally extradite him if the Committee in Marseille continued to carry on illegal activities—and the better judgment of the Committee in New York City, Fry chose to stay longer than his original visa allowed, his tenure eventually stretching to autumn 1942. His decision to stay was more an affront to the American authorities, in whom Fry had expected to find allies for his work, than it was to French officials. Because of the financial contributions of Mary Jayne Gold, Fry’s committee also provided aid and assistance to a larger group of people than the ERC in New York originally intended. Davenport wrote later that “it welcomed any and all Hitler-Mussolini-Stalinist resisters, rich or poor, famous or unknown, artists, writers, professors, lawyers, journalists, trade-unionists, no matter what their religion or political party may have been.”¹³ In doing so, Fry and the Centre Américain de Secours assisted about four thousand people, helping nearly half of them to leave France by legal or illegal means.¹⁴

“Just filling out the form”: Women’s Roles in the Centre Américain de Secours

Margaret Collins Weitz has argued that commitment to resistance was often a non-political, “visceral, patriotic reaction to seeing the Germans on French soil,” and characterized “women who helped in Resistance” as idealists, independent, outsiders,

¹³ Miriam Davenport Ebel to Susan Morgenstein, undated but probably sometime in late 1991, folder 312, box 17, Records Relating to the Development of “Assignment Rescue” (1993-1995), Office of Exhibitions, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Institutional Archives, Linthicum, Maryland.

¹⁴ Elizabeth Kessin Berman, Susan Morgenstein, and Anita Kassof, “Afterword,” in *Surrender on Demand* by Varian Fry, third edition (Boulder: Johnson Books, 1997), 256.

mavericks, even revolutionaries.¹⁵ Miriam Davenport's image of her colleagues and herself was not so romantic. She wrote that she and her colleagues, both men and women, at the Centre Américain de Secours were "like those who passed through our doors, haunted by a heavy past and a menacing present."¹⁶ Perhaps a good representative of her colleagues, Davenport was a talkative, friendly graduate student of art at the Université de Paris when the war began. Both of her parents had died during her last two years at Smith College, leaving her alone to raise her younger brother. She had set out to obtain a graduate degree in order to be able to take care of him, and determined that it was less expensive to study in Paris and teach English, than it was to stay in the United States.

Toulouse proved to be the destination of many who fled the Germans after a brief war. It was there that Miriam Davenport met Mary Jayne Gold, who had been living in Paris when war erupted in Europe and when the Germans invaded France. She wrote,

The first year, which was called the "phony war," was rather a bore. Nothing much happened on the military fronts and there was nothing much to do in the rear. Except that you knew it couldn't last, and a vague anxiety kept inching closer. Then it happened—the earthquake, I mean—and I found myself on the congested roads of France, fleeing before the German Army.¹⁷

Gold joined the exodus to southern France, where refugees hoped for safety from the occupier. Davenport hoped to sit for her exams at a university in Toulouse; instead, she encountered Charles Wolff, an Alsatian acquaintance from Paris who introduced her to the world of politics through an active intellectual life in a downtown café. Walter Mehring, the German poet and active anti-Fascist, was staying in the same

¹⁵ Weitz, *Sisters in the Resistance*, 88

¹⁶ Varian Fry, *du refuge à l'exil*, Actes du colloque des 19 et 20 mars 1999, Hôtel du département, Marseille (Arles: Actes Sud, 2000), 17.

¹⁷ Gold, *Crossroads Marseilles*, ix

hotel as Davenport, and they quickly became friends. Wolff in turn was a friend of Danny Bénédite, a functionary at the Prefecture in Paris whose wife and mother descended into Toulouse with an American friend, Mary Jayne Gold. It was through Charles Wolff and Danny Bénédite that Gold and Davenport met. While in Toulouse, Davenport received word that her fiancé in Yugoslavia was ill and Gold, who offered to help Davenport reunite with him, decided to return to the United States with her dog, Dagobert. In order to leave France, both women were required to obtain the proper paperwork with the American Consulate in Marseille, and they agreed to reconnect in Marseille as they waited to get their papers in order.¹⁸ As Davenport prepared to leave Toulouse, Wolff and other friends cajoled her to scout out ways “to wrap anti-Nazis in the American flag.”¹⁹

Marseille was bustling with people trying desperately to get out of France. It was a veritable Mediterranean *carrefour*, the last major seaport in France that was free from Nazi control. Rumors proliferated in an atmosphere of congestion and hopelessness, and the underbelly of society simmered anxiously. And, yet, while it was teeming with people, Marseille at the time of Fry’s arrival was not the impoverished, lawless city he previously had imagined.

Having readily agreed to do what she could for the refugees, Davenport soon reunited with Gold, who was also interested in helping refugees for as long as she remained in France. They inquired about leads almost immediately after arriving in Marseille, but were told that no one was working with anti-Nazi refugees. With a trip to the Red Cross they learned that the international aid organization was only distributing

¹⁸ Ebel, “An Unsentimental Education,” 3-10

¹⁹ Ibid, 11

milk to the French—information so disappointing that they later dismissed the person who placed a newspaper advertisement looking for people to help ‘Valerian Fry,’ as just another ‘milkman.’”²⁰

A café called the Pelikan was a popular meeting place for people in Davenport and Gold’s position. One day in August 1940, Walter Mehring found Davenport at the Pelikan and asked her to take a message to Fry on his behalf, since Mehring was afraid of being followed to the Hôtel Splendide, where Fry was staying. Davenport readily agreed, and after giving Fry the message she offered information about other refugees she had met in Toulouse. Fry quickly offered her a job and she was overjoyed. She purportedly told him, “You are doing exactly what I have been dreaming of doing for a long time now.”²¹ She started interviewing on the first day the Committee opened to welcome the war-whipped public, “against all probabilities, joyfully working on the shady side of French law in a resistance run by an equally unlikely American.”²²

Fry hired her to interview refugees who came to the office seeking aid. He wrote that she was an ideal interviewer for their operation:

She spoke French and German as few Americans do, and her knowledge of art and artists made her very useful when we had to distinguish between the many refugees who claimed to be artists worthy of our help. When she had never heard of them, she would tell them to go down to the Vieux Port and make a sketch. When they brought the sketch back she would look at it and decided right away whether they were any good or not.²³

²⁰ Ibid, 16

²¹ Ibid, 16-17

²² Ibid, 5

²³ Fry, *Surrender on Demand*, 38

Years later, Davenport asserted that she made an excellent interviewer because of her own personal circumstances: “I was as homeless as our clients and a lot poorer than some of them; my mother and father died in my Junior and Senior years at Smith... [Now you can understand] why the plight of our clients tore my heart out.”²⁴ As a security measure, Fry also named her Secretary General of the Emergency Rescue Committee in France, because “Davenport” was a convincingly American name. The title required nothing but that she sign the annual report; later she would use the empty title to demand a little respect from the city police when Mehring was arrested while Fry was in Lisbon, reconnoitering as the New York office of the ERC had originally intended.²⁵

Davenport also provided the Emergency Rescue Committee with a connection to something necessary on a practical level: she introduced Varian Fry to Mary Jayne Gold. Gold had been born in Evanston, Illinois, to a wealthy family. She had attended private schools in New York City and Verona, Italy, in 1938, the same year Davenport arrived in Paris. Gold soon moved to the City of Light, where she spent time with Danny and Theo Bénédite.²⁶ Before the war she had been living a luxurious life in Paris, complete with a private plane and wild parties.²⁷ She had been staying in a cottage in

²⁴ Miriam Davenport Ebel to Susan Morgenstein, undated but probably sometime in late 1991, folder 312, box 17, Records Relating to the Development of “Assignment Rescue” (1993-1995), Office of Exhibitions. She wanted to correct an error that appeared in Donna Ryan’s book that described both Davenport and Gold as high society women.

²⁵ Ebel, “An Unsentimental Education,” 19-31

²⁶ Mary Jayne Gold to Miss Grief, 28 February 1991, folder 855, box 49, Records Relating to the Development of “Assignment Rescue” (1993-1995), Office of Exhibitions, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Institutional Archives, Linthicum, Maryland.

²⁷ Gold, *Crossroads Marseilles*, ix

Châteauneuf with Theo Bénédite and her mother-in-law when the Germans invaded. They listened to the invasion on the radio and nervously watched the line of cars descending on the road from Paris. The three women, the Bénédites' son Peterkin, and Gold's poodle Dagobert soon joined the flood. "We were lucky in a way," she said in an oral history interview three decades later. "As I was in the habit of crisscrossing France, I always had proper maps."²⁸

After France's fall, Gold intended to leave France and return to the United States. The Bénédites asked her to take Peterkin with her, so she took Peterkin and left Dagobert with Danny and Theo and set off for Bordeaux, where the French government temporarily was located. They were stopped in Biarritz, where officials told Gold she did not have the proper papers to take Peterkin out of the country. By that time Theo Bénédite had arrived in Toulouse, so Gold met her there in late June 1940. Soon after her own arrival, Gold met Miriam Davenport, who later described Gold as "big, beautiful, and blonde [with] a splendidly relaxed, no-nonsense air about her. Better, she soon revealed a warm sense of humor. Mary Jayne Gold and I became friends at first sight; our friendship has lasted a lifetime."²⁹ Davenport also remembered that Gold "was an ardent Gaullist herself, and passionately anti-Nazi. Even her poodle, Dagobert, would bark furiously whenever someone muttered 'Hitler! Hitler!'"³⁰ The two women agreed to

²⁸ Mary Jayne Gold, Oral History interview, 10 April 1991, Tape 1, Varian Fry Collection, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, D.C.

²⁹ Ebel, "An Unsentimental Education," 11

³⁰ Ibid, 12. Davenport's use of the term "Gaullist" was anachronistic: Gold was certainly anti-fascist in general and anti-Nazi in particular, but by fall 1940 there were few supporters of de Gaulle, and even fewer who openly referred to themselves that way.

reunite in Marseille, where each needed to renew their passports to be able to leave the country.

Procuring the necessary paperwork was not simple, even for an American attempting to get home. After they were reunited in August 1940, a gregarious Davenport introduced Gold to three legionnaires. The fivesome became close friends and Gold and one legionnaire, nicknamed Killer, became lovers. Killer had deserted the Foreign Legion, intent on joining de Gaulle in England, and Gold often suggested it was that flirtation that led her to stay in France.³¹ Davenport later wrote that she and the three legionnaires were “Mary Jayne’s first beneficiaries in Marseilles.”³² While they waited on bureaucracy, Davenport and Gold continued to look for opportunities to help the refugees who were trapped in Marseille. After Mehring introduced Davenport to Fry in late August, Davenport suggested that Fry take Gold on staff. At first Fry was wary about the idea of hiring wealthy Mary Jayne Gold, although the Committee needed money to finance what was turning out to be a much larger project than the ERC in New York had imagined, and Davenport persisted in advocating for her friend. Gold later wrote, “Miriam, who had proved herself to be trustworthy in all other matters, kept urging Varian to meet me, saying I was thoroughly reliable and good for a few thousand

³¹ Gold, *Crossroads Marseilles*, 85-95; and Mary Jayne Gold, folder 855, box 49, Records Relating to the Development of “Assignment Rescue” (1993-1995), Office of Exhibitions, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Institutional Archives, Linthicum, Maryland.

³² Miriam Davenport, handwritten caption on photograph (photocopied), folder 841, box 48, Records Relating to the Development of “Assignment Rescue” (1993-1995), Office of Exhibitions, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Institutional Archives, Linthicum, Maryland.

anyway.”³³ In early September, Davenport and Gold met Fry by chance on a street corner, and an evening together in a café was enough to convince Fry of Gold’s sincerity. But he did not accept money from her right away: first he hired her as an interviewer.³⁴

Gold modestly simplified the responsibility involved with interviewing, which determined who the Committee could and would assist:

I wasn’t really responsible for the lives of these people, I was just filling out the form and trying to make it as positive as possible... I just felt that I was being helpful, and I was delighted to be doing something useful for a change, and it wasn’t heroic, because with an American passport I could have gotten out of the country and we were not in the war yet and our country, the administration, was very favorable to Vichy, so they wouldn’t have dared to touch an American citizen at that time.³⁵

Eventually Gold’s duties would extend beyond interviewing refugees who sought assistance from the CAS. She soon began working as a courier, running errands and taking messages to clients who were in hiding. Fry warned her that everyone involved in the committee was being followed, that they had to be careful, but through the legionnaires Gold had taken up with gangsters, who had taught her “how to jump on and off street cars” and other tricks of working underground.³⁶

By mid-September 1940 Gold was donating money to the operation in addition to participating in its everyday activities. Davenport had explained to Gold that the Centre Américain de Secours did not have enough money to fund all the work and all the procurement of papers, especially for the uncelebrated, anonymous refugees. Gold

³³ Gold, *Crossroads Marseilles*, 159

³⁴ Gold, Oral History 1

³⁵ Ibid

³⁶ Mary Jayne Gold, Oral History interview, 10 April 1991, Tape 2, Varian Fry Collection, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, D.C.

offered \$3,000 to help defray expenses, a proposition that Fry was wary of in the beginning; eventually Gold contributed much more than that amount.³⁷ Fry's right-hand man, Beamish Hirschman, had a contact in the black market who in turn was charged with changing money for men hoping to escape to the United States. This contact would introduce Gold to men who needed two or three thousand dollars and Gold would pass a handwritten note through Lisbon to her banker, who would transfer the money. The men in need would give Gold their foreign currency at five or six times the market rate, and Gold turned that money over to the Committee. That money allowed the Committee to expand the number of people it was able to help, a group of rank-and-file people that Miriam Davenport dubbed the Gold List.³⁸ These were some of the people Gold interviewed, whom she described as "very simple people, they hadn't written books or painted pictures, and they'd been so brave."³⁹ Gold continued to donate money to the Centre Américain de Secours until she left Marseille in June 1941.

"Feminine wiles were safer": Rescue as Resistance

When Varian Fry registered the Emergency Rescue Committee in Marseille, he altered the name in French: Centre Américain de Secours, or the American Center for Aid. The new French name suggested connotations of cooperative humanitarian aid,

³⁷ Ebel, "An Unsentimental Education," 26

³⁸ Gold, Oral History 1. In an official report of the CAS's financial status, Hermant Hirschman acknowledged the crucial contributions of Mary Jayne Gold and Peggy Guggenheim, which "made possible an increase in activity." See Financial Report, 21 October 1941, "CAS Financial Reports" folder, box 7, Varian Fry Papers, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University in the City of New York.

³⁹ Gold, Oral History 1

rather than subversive attempts to rescue certain cultural elites. Fry was surprised by the France and the French that he found upon arrival. In September 1940—already having extended his stay until, as he frequently wrote home, his successor arrived—he wrote to his wife, Eileen Fry, about the status of refugees, aid organizations, and French morale:

Life here is very different from what we imagined it would be before I left; there is no disorder... But the French people are still governed by the French, even though Germany pulls the strings. If we helped them now – and God knows they need our help as no people ever has before – the uncertainty that lingers now would vanish from their minds; they would feel that democracy was, after all, worth saving... It is the non-French refugees among whom one finds the greatest misery today. Many of them – certainly a majority of them – are Jewish, and the Jewish agencies have had to close their doors for lack of funds...⁴⁰

According to one biographer, Fry apparently doubted that the cultural elite on his lists were actually in danger—and so did they. He complained about wasting time trying to convince the likes of Chagall that the artist needed to leave France, while anonymous refugees packed the stairway and lobby of his office.⁴¹ Nor had he expected that American Consul General Hugh Fullerton—whom Fry had assumed would be an ally—would endorse the Vichy government to the extent that American officials in Marseille actively thwarted the ERC’s attempts to procure the necessary documents for fugitives of the Gestapo.⁴²

⁴⁰ Varian Fry to Eileen Fry, 7 September 1940, “Fry Correspondence – Eileen Fry” folder, box 3, Varian Fry Papers, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University in the City of New York.

⁴¹ Elizabeth Kessin Berman, “Moral Triage or Cultural Salvage? The Agendas of Varian Fry and the Emergency Rescue Committee,” in *Exiles and Emigres: the Flight of European Artists from Hitler*, ed. Stephanie Barron (LA: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1997), 109.

⁴² Mark Polizzotti, *Revolution of the Mind: The Life of André Breton* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1995), 486.

The ERC office in New York had commissioned him to collect information in France and Portugal, but it seemed clear to Fry that there was a greater need—one initially espoused by the American Friends of German Freedom. In response to the needs of Jewish refugees, Fry set up the CAS and hired interviewers, including Gold and Davenport, to determine who needed help and how. Thanks to funding from Gold and Peggy Guggenheim, he added to the original list of refugees and took advantage of the only American program to aid refugees, the “emergency visitor” visa program. The program provided special visas to people who could offer cultural, political, or intellectual gifts to the United States. During the day the Centre Américain de Secours served as a humanitarian organization for refugees stranded in Marseille or interned, and at night a conspiratorial group looking for illegal, underground routes to get refugees out. By the winter, Varian Fry decided to take fundraising into his own hands entirely, because he doubted (and knew from correspondence) that the New York office supported what he was doing.⁴³

The office of the Centre Américain de Secours hummed with activity from very early in the morning until very late at night. Fry found the work harder than anything he had ever experienced, and the schedule grueling, but his enthusiasm (as well as the demands) leaps from the typewritten page addressed to his wife:

Strangely, though there are a dozen harrowing scenes every day, I love the work. The pleasure of being able to help even a few people more than makes up for the pain of having to turn others down or – [here he continued in pencil] Interrupted! I am *so* busy I never get a moment.⁴⁴

⁴³ Berman, 99-105

⁴⁴ Varian Fry to Eileen Fry, 7 September 1940

Leaving France required money and luck enough to acquire and maintain a small mountain of documentation before any one document expired: affidavits of support from sponsors in host country, entry visa from host country's government, exit visa from France, and transit visas for every stop along the way.⁴⁵ Interviewers like Davenport and Gold sifted through the innumerable applications for aid and spoke with people to determine what kind of danger they faced, Fry negotiated with the American Consul and Vice Consul, and Lisa and Hans Fittko—anti-Fascist refugees themselves—guided others across the Pyrenees into Spain. Despite the difficult conditions, unending work and harsh reality of the effect of bureaucracy on human lives, Davenport wrote that the late-night conferences in Fry's hotel room, which doubled as their first office, might have been mistaken for parties.⁴⁶ The office was composed of two rooms, one for conferences with Fry, and one for interviews with refugees. Fry had covered the front room with American flags, a decorating decision that Gold thought reassured the refugees.⁴⁷

Despite its initial function to collect information about the situation of refugees in France, the committee's real purpose—which was not lost on police—"was the exportation, as expeditiously as possible, of people the Gestapo would like to catch," Miriam Davenport wrote.⁴⁸ Fry in turn believed it was the Committee's mission to

⁴⁵ Polizzotti, *Revolution of the Mind*, 486

⁴⁶ Miriam Davenport Ebel to Marian Craig, "My formal tribute to Varian Fry," 19 March 1991, folder 424, box 21, Records Relating to the Development of "Assignment Rescue" (1993-1995), Office of Exhibitions, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Institutional Archives, Linthicum, Maryland.

⁴⁷ Gold, Oral History 1

⁴⁸ Ebel, "An Unsentimental Education," 24

preserve European civilization through the rescue of its visionaries—and that a highly-publicized operation served as support for a more covert operation.⁴⁹ “It was inevitable,” he wrote in the 1960s, “that my activity would direct me into contact with the Resistance and that as a result it could not be continued indefinitely.”⁵⁰

Some work—“secret mailings, passing of frontiers without necessary papers, false identification papers, transformation and alteration of passports, purchase of visas, assistance of accomplices, information, places of hiding”—necessitated cooperation with gangsters and black market businessmen, who sometimes turned out to be dishonest and unreliable.⁵¹ The committee continued to use agents and liaisons they knew who were connected with the gangsters and agents they needed; they limited contact with the gangsters as much as possible in order to avoid “compromising” the mission of the CAS.⁵² Nevertheless, Fry and others acknowledged that the Committee was sometimes too trusting and not discriminating enough in choosing the agents and liaisons with whom it worked on a case-by-case basis, even when that system was often the only one possible. In an official report on its activities, the Committee in Marseille argued that “the

⁴⁹ Ebel, “My formal tribute to Varian Fry”

⁵⁰ Varian Fry to Police Judiciaire, 27 July 1965, “Location of CAS files” folder, box 7, Varian Fry Papers, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University in the City of New York.

⁵¹ Centre Américain de Secours, “Auxiliary Services,” TMs, p. 1-2, “CAS Administrative Reports” folder, box 7, Varian Fry Papers, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University in the City of New York.

⁵² *Ibid*, 2

only services which were performed without a hitch were... wherever we had our own people working for us, individuals who were reliable, devoted and disinterested.”⁵³

Davenport described the staff as “a very mixed bag,” and she came to realize that she was not the only person on the staff for whom the work was confusing, stressful and new.⁵⁴ Beamish Hirschman, Fry’s second in command in the first part of the Committee’s work, likened the CAS to a field ambulance corps that evacuated the wounded. At the end of October 1940, Fry explained in a letter to his wife the reality of their everyday work: “We are in effect a de luxe relief bureau for a special type of client, the intellectual who has never before had to ask for help of this kind, who is embarrassed to have to do so, and who cannot be asked to take his place in the lines which wait outside the ordinary relief agencies...”⁵⁵ An administrative report self-referentially delineated three periods of different procedures for carrying out the work: August through September 1940, when conditions at the Spanish border changed and forced them to look for another way to leave France; October 1940 through April 1941, when the process grew more complicated and they considered a boat route; and from May 1941, when larger groups of people leaving together became the standard, the Fittko route became impractical and forged visas impossible, and paying off inspectors became

⁵³ Ibid, 16-18

⁵⁴ Ebel, “An Unsentimental Education,” 20, 23

⁵⁵ Varian Fry to Eileen Fry, 31 October 31 1940, “Fry Correspondence – Eileen Fry” folder, box 3, Varian Fry Papers, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University in the City of New York.

the norm.⁵⁶ Davenport left for Yugoslavia in the beginning of the second phase, but Gold remained through to June 1941.

Just before Miriam Davenport left Marseille in October 1940, Mary Jayne Gold's role as a courier and liaison took a new form. Davenport and Beamish Hirschman approached her to go to the internment camp at Le Vernet to ask the commandant to release four political activists.⁵⁷ At the time Gold was recovering from an illness and asked why she was the one to go; she was, predictably, annoyed to hear that she had the most innocent, trustworthy face. Fry worded the reasoning more forcefully: "Feminine wiles were safer [than planning an escape], and we had a made-to-order charmer in the person of Mary Jayne Gold."⁵⁸ She left Marseille early the following morning and traveled by train, carefully avoiding travel permit checkpoints as she had learned to do, first to Toulouse and then to Le Vernet. Frightened at the prospect of having to trade her dignity for the lives of four men but willing all the same, she went to the commandant's office and explained that the Committee, the Consulate, and the prisoners' wives had all written letters, and that she was there to ask that four prisoners be sent under guard to Marseille to put their papers in order. The commandant agreed, and then asked her to have dinner with him. Before she left, the commandant arranged for her to see the four prisoners, who were relieved to have help from Fry's committee. Later that night, when the commandant failed to appear for their date, Gold worried that her behavior had in some way nullified the agreement and compromised the prisoners' safety. The next

⁵⁶ "Auxiliary Services," 2-16

⁵⁷ Gold, *Crossroads Marseilles*, 209-211

⁵⁸ Fry, *Surrender on Demand*, 86

morning she returned to the camp, afraid of the grave consequences of a missed date, but the commandant assured her that he had dined with the Gestapo and would have preferred dining with her. Gold left on the next train; the prisoners arrived soon afterwards, and the CAS was able to smuggle them out of the country.⁵⁹

By the end of October 1940, some members of the committee had moved just outside the city to a villa that Davenport, Gold, and another staff member had found. It did not take long to find residents: Mary Jayne Gold moved into villa with Fry, the Bénédictes, Surrealist leader André Breton and his wife and daughter, and Russian revolutionary writer Victor Serge, his son and a friend. Soon after Gold paid the deposit on the villa, Davenport finally secured her papers and left for Yugoslavia, harboring the hope that she would return to Marseille as soon as possible.⁶⁰ The villa soon welcomed a bevy of intellectuals from Breton's circle, whose creativity and art inevitably provided a playful counterfoil for the grave situation in which they found themselves. But the villa was not completely safe from police raids, the usual tensions of housemates, and the anxiety of getting out of France alive. Serge dubbed it "Château Espère-Visa," and an unusually cold winter, combined with a shortage of heating fuel and food, weighed on the already-heavy hearts of the villa's occupants—refugees and rescuers. Six months after the move to the villa, Gold wrote to Davenport, who remained in Yugoslavia, "The plantains in front have had their heads cut off (so may we), and look pretty scrawny (so may we) and we have had visits from rather disagreeable people with flat feet. The sand restriction coupled with the fact that some of the inmates are slightly nuts make relations

⁵⁹ Gold, Oral History 2; see also Fry, *Surrender on Demand I*, 86

⁶⁰ Gold, Oral History 1

slightly strained. Everything for example is o.k. today – but what will tomorrow bring?... I can hardly recommend either the villa or the Com. as a cure for nervous disorders.”⁶¹

Striking the balance between legal and illegal, rescue and resistance work was a difficult task, particularly when cooperation with French and American authorities, as suggested by Mildred Adams, was onerous if not counter-productive to the committee’s chief aim. Gold wrote later, “We thought the Gestapo would be more selective, and the French more protective.”⁶² In January 1941, H. Freeman Matthews, the First Secretary of the United States Embassy, responded to letters from Varian Fry, cordially refusing to offer any help in obtaining exit visas for non-Americans, and instead directed Fry to consider other diplomatic contacts.⁶³ Six months later, in June 1941, Fry wrote to Davenport, who was still in Yugoslavia, with news that the American Consulate’s visa regulations were growing stricter and that the future of the CAS appeared dim: “It is a discouraging period to live through, but we are going to stick it out as long as we can be

⁶¹ Mary Jayne Gold to Miriam Davenport, 5 March 1941, folder 841, box 48, Records Relating to the Development of “Assignment Rescue” (1993-1995), Office of Exhibitions, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Institutional Archives, Linthicum, Maryland.

⁶² Gold, *Crossroads Marseilles*, 206

⁶³ H. Freeman Matthews to Varian Fry, 9 January 1941, “American Embassy, Vichy” folder, box 7, Varian Fry Papers, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University in the City of New York. Ultimately the final decision on refugee’s visas lay with the consul. By end of 1940, 1,236 of the authorized 3,268 emergency visitor visas had been granted to political refugees in France and Portugal. The emergency visa program ended in July 1941, although some visas had been authorized but not yet issued. See Wyman, 148.

useful even if only in a more and more limited way.”⁶⁴ The U.S. State Department warned Fry that the U.S. government could not support the Committee’s illegal activities, but Fry had resolved to remain in France until the American government physically removed him and to establish a serious relief agency that would act as a cover for the work providing assistance to the political and cultural refugees on Hitler’s list—and that would in turn allow them to assist not only the cultural elite but also, in particular, Jews.⁶⁵

“He saved my life”: Remaining engaged

Davenport and Gold remained in France for relatively short periods of the Occupation, and they were lucky enough to leave the country before Vichy and the Germans clenched their fists tightly around European Jews. But their absence from France did not mean that they abruptly ended the work they had been doing with the Centre Américain de Secours; indeed, it continued, in some form, for the rest of their lives, in no small part because of the relationships that endured the passing decades and the trends in American historical memory.

Three days after Fry, Gold and the Surrealists moved into the villa outside of Marseille, Miriam Davenport finally was able to leave France to join her fiancé in Yugoslavia. She had waited, unsuccessfully, to see if she could get a return French visa.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Varian Fry to Miriam Davenport, 18 June 1941, folder 425, box 22, Records Relating to the Development of “Assignment Rescue” (1993-1995), Office of Exhibitions, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Institutional Archives, Linthicum, Maryland.

⁶⁵ Gold, *Crossroads Marseilles*, 208.

⁶⁶ Varian Fry, “Miriam Davenport, “Surrender on Demand notes” folder, box 11, Varian Fry Papers, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University in the City of New York.

On Fry's behalf, she carried a list of names with her to Geneva on the way to Yugoslavia, which she later claimed was a capital offense and the only time she consciously risked her life.⁶⁷ Fry in turn attempted to use his contacts to help his former interviewer back into France and then the United States. He wrote to the American Embassy in Vichy in late January 1941, requesting information about visas to the United States, including a visa for Davenport and her fiancé to leave Yugoslavia and return to France. The response was a typically red-taped letter: "In regard to the general question of exit visas for refugees, for obvious reasons, as I informed you in my letter of January 9, 1941, the Embassy is not in a position to obtain individual exit visas for the many refugees in France."⁶⁸ In addition, Davenport evidently had a hard time leaving Yugoslavia with her fiancé for the United States via Marseille, since Gold counseled her to put the wedding and Rudolph off "until happier times—particularly if you expect to stay and work here" in Marseille.⁶⁹ In June, Fry wrote to Davenport that while Mary Jayne Gold was sending her more money he advised her to go directly to the United States.⁷⁰ A second letter from Fry two weeks later reiterated the same point, but he soon seemed resigned to the fact that she, like many of her former clients, would be trapped in an unfamiliar place for an unknown amount of time. On June 23, 1941, Fry wrote with a list of people in Zurich and

⁶⁷ Ebel, "An Unsentimental Education," 34

⁶⁸ Varian Fry to U.S. Embassy, 31 January 1941, "Fry Correspondence – Miriam Davenport" folder, box 3, Varian Fry Papers, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University in the City of New York.

⁶⁹ Mary Jayne Gold to Miriam Davenport, 5 March 1941

⁷⁰ Varian Fry to Miriam Davenport, 4 June 1941, folder 425, box 22, Records Relating to the Development of "Assignment Rescue" (1993-1995), Office of Exhibitions, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Institutional Archives, Linthicum, Maryland.

Geneva with whom she might find work helping refugees, and four days later he wrote again asking her to intercede with the American Red Cross on behalf of the committee in Marseille about providing aid for concentration camp internees.⁷¹ That summer Davenport and her fiancé were able to get as far as Switzerland, narrowly missing Gold upon their brief return to Marseille.

Davenport's life in the United States reflected much the same ethos as it had in France. She began working again for the Emergency Rescue Committee in New York in the fall of 1943; by then, it was called the International Rescue and Relief Committee. Her responsibilities included maintaining contact with the Committee's contributors and continuing the administrative work of Eileen Fry, Varian Fry's wife, and Harold Oram, for the Progressive Schools Committee for Refugee Children.⁷² Over the next twenty years, Davenport worked for the International Rescue and Relief Committee, the NAACP, the American Council of Learned Societies' Committee for the Protection of Cultural Treasures in War Areas, and afterwards for the Emergency Committee of Atomic Scientists in Princeton, before finally settling in Mount Pleasant, Michigan, to teach French.⁷³

⁷¹ Varian Fry to Miriam Davenport, 18 June 1941, folder 425, box 22; and 23 June 1941, folder 841, box 48, Records Relating to the Development of "Assignment Rescue" (1993-1995), Office of Exhibitions, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Institutional Archives, Linthicum, Maryland; and 27 June 1941, folder 425, box 22, Records Relating to the Development of "Assignment Rescue" (1993-1995), Office of Exhibitions, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Institutional Archives, Linthicum, Maryland.

⁷² Miriam Davenport Ebel, handwritten note (photocopied), March 1991, folder 425, box 22, Records Relating to the Development of "Assignment Rescue" (1993-1995), Office of Exhibitions, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Institutional Archives, Linthicum, Maryland.

Mary Jayne Gold encountered fewer obstacles in her endeavor to leave France, but she experienced a healthy amount of disappointment in American understanding of the war. On June 14, 1941, Mary Jayne Gold wrote to Miriam Davenport with some frustration, “From what I hear Americans are very touched as to the fate of refugees and certainly for there [sic] own compatriots! But they don’t realize what it’s all about over here or how difficult it is – or what to do about it.”⁷⁴ She may have been preparing for her own return to the United States, because four days later Fry wrote to Davenport to say that “Mary Jayne and Dagobert are leaving tomorrow with their passports in their pockets and all their visas with them.”⁷⁵ Gold and Dagobert were forced to stop for several months in Lisbon, where she worked for the Unitarian Service Committee in Lisbon. She had written to Davenport earlier in June 1941 that she was unsure what she would do once she returned to the United States. Gold mused, “I can’t see myself settling into parasitic ease or alcoholic stupor with my peers in Chicago. Maybe I’ll strike out on my own in New York.”⁷⁶ That is nearly exactly what she did. The experience working in Marseille evidently inspired Gold to pursue advanced formal education: “Although I had read omnivorously in history and biography and had

⁷³ Rosemary Sullivan, *Villa Air-Bel: World War II, Escape, and a House in Marseille* (New York: Harper Collins, 2006), 418.

⁷⁴ Mary Jayne Gold to Miriam Davenport, 14 June 1941, folder 855, box 49, Records Relating to the Development of “Assignment Rescue” (1993-1995), Office of Exhibitions, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Institutional Archives, Linthicum, Maryland.

⁷⁵ Varian Fry to Miriam Davenport, 18 June 1941

⁷⁶ Mary Jayne Gold to Miriam Davenport, 6 June 1941, folder 841, box 48, Records Relating to the Development of “Assignment Rescue” (1993-1995), Office of Exhibitions, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Institutional Archives, Linthicum, Maryland.

wandered several times through most of the museums of Western Europe, it had been a hit-and-miss sort of education. The bedrock training of college and graduate work came a year or so later, when I got back to the States. My mind was relatively untrained, but it was acquisitive and inquisitive.”⁷⁷ She worked briefly for the International Rescue and Relief Committee in New York before enrolling the following fall in Columbia University’s International Administration program specializing in France. She later received a Master’s degree in sociology from the New School for Social Research—one of the institutions interested in the refugees aided by Fry’s committee—and pursued additional study in anthropology and psychology.⁷⁸ In October 1942, Fry wrote a letter of recommendation on Mary Jayne Gold’s behalf when she applied to rent an apartment. He affirmed, not surprisingly, that she was “an ideal tenant in every way” who “lives alone, and quietly... [and] has a highly developed sense of responsibility.”⁷⁹ That sense had not wavered.

In the meantime, Fry was finally removing himself, albeit unwillingly, from Marseille. He had overstayed the welcome of French and American officials—though not that of the refugees who continued to seek him and his American committee out for assistance. As early as late September 1940—already a month overdue in New York—Fry had telegraphed his wife to reassure her that he would be returning to the United States as soon as a successor was found; he even telegraphed her with opinions about

⁷⁷ Gold, *Crossroads Marseilles*, 247

⁷⁸ Mary Jayne Gold to Miss Grief, 28 February 1991

⁷⁹ Varian Fry to G. Vitagliano, 15 October 1942, “Fry Correspondence – Mary Jayne Gold” folder, box 4, Varian Fry Papers, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University in the City of New York.

where in New York they ought to move next.⁸⁰ But by the next month, Fry was insisting that if he left Marseille the operation there would collapse; he asked his wife to speak with the New York office about sending his successor as soon as possible since leaving before “his” arrival would be “criminally irresponsible” and since Fry could “no more abandon [his] people here than [he] could [his] own children.”⁸¹ In August 1941, Fry was expelled from France as an “undesirable alien.”⁸² He arrived in New York in October 1941, grief-stricken by the departure from France, by the loss of his friends, and the absence of “that spirit of intimate companionship and devotion to a common cause we had all shared.”⁸³ He soon learned that the U.S. State Department had once again tightened its restrictions on visa applications, and he set to work raising money for the Committee’s work and writing to friends and colleagues for support for the work he had begun in France.⁸⁴ His activities, expanded from the original list and plan, had met with

⁸⁰ Varian Fry to Eileen Fry, telegram, 25 September 1940, “Fry Correspondence – Eileen Fry” folder, box 3, Varian Fry Papers, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University in the City of New York.

⁸¹ Varian Fry to Eileen Fry, telegram, 1 October 1940, “Fry Correspondence – Eileen Fry” folder, box 3, Varian Fry Papers, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University in the City of New York.

⁸² Polizzotti, *Revolution of the Mind*, 495. The work continued under the leadership of the Bénédictes until June 1942, when government halted its activities entirely.

⁸³ Fry, *Surrender on Demand*, 232-233

⁸⁴ Fry, *Surrender on Demand*, 236; Varian Fry to Theodora Bénédite, 14 November 1941, “Fry Correspondence – Theo Bénédite” folder, box 3, Varian Fry Papers, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University in the City of New York; and Varian Fry to Walter Mehring, 2 December 1941, “Fry Correspondence – Walter Mehring” folder, box 4, Varian Fry Papers, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University in the City of New York.

opposition from the Emergency Rescue Committee members in New York, and he was asked to leave the committee soon after he returned to the United States.⁸⁵

Fry's relationship with the ERC may have ended but his commitment to the refugees stuck in France did not. As the editor of the *New Republic* and in numerous other articles and essays, he criticized American immigration policy and raised the call to aid those, particularly Jews, who were still trapped in France.⁸⁶ Fry published a detailed memoir, *Surrender on Demand*, in 1945, when the information would no longer compromise the work to be done in France. Despite his efforts to help all refugees in danger, the tagline on the Random House published book proclaimed, "He rescued famous men and women on the Gestapo black list!"⁸⁷ Caricatures of some of the CAS staff were reproduced for the original cover of the book; the caption under Davenport's image read that she was "the interviewer. She was always either laughing or coughing,"—a testament, perhaps, to the friendly atmosphere in the office and poor health of the larger French context.⁸⁸

Twenty years after the war, the memory of the Emergency Rescue Committee and the friendship among at least three of its American colleagues remained fast, although the United States government still failed to recognize their contributions to France and the historiography of the period largely overlooked their work. The official

⁸⁵ Berman, "Moral Triage or Cultural Salvage?", 101

⁸⁶ Ibid, 109

⁸⁷ Varian Fry, "Surrender on Demand," "Ephemera" folder, box 8, Varian Fry Papers, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University in the City of New York.

⁸⁸ *Surrender on Demand* original jacket, "Jacket" folder, box 11, Varian Fry Papers, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University in the City of New York.

files in Marseille had been looted and misplaced after 1942, and in the 1960s Fry decided to track them down. In July 1965, Fry wrote to the head of the regional police explaining his operation in the early 1940s and asking for his files to be returned. Failing that, Fry wrote to Gold in July 1965 for help recalling the present circumstances of their colleagues and clients—many of whom had, since the war, become accomplished in their fields—for an article he was writing for the *New York Times* magazine. He cheerfully reflected, “In fact, only you and I remain relatively obscure!” The note is unsigned, and closed with “Cheerio! It’s fun, anyway!”⁸⁹ Gold sent Fry a handwritten note in response to bring him up to date with Davenport’s recent life: “Miriam taught art – also sculpture and had some of her things accepted by an Ohio museum. She is getting a Phd [*sic*] in French. Thesis something about ‘Literary Sources of Freud’... I agree about our obscurity. Well, we shared our finest hours, my friend.” She signed it, “Modestly and obscurely yours, M.J.”⁹⁰ It is a cheerful exchange between two people who shared life during a difficult period.

That same year, Miriam Davenport returned to Marseille on a vacation from teaching and sent Varian Fry two postcards, celebrating what she called the twenty-fifth anniversary of their work.⁹¹ Even as the three were individually and collectively marking

⁸⁹ Varian Fry to Mary Jayne Gold, 18 July 1965, “’65 article on ERC” folder, box 8, Varian Fry Papers, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University in the City of New York.

⁹⁰ Mary Jayne Gold to Varian Fry, 20 July 1965, “’65 article on ERC” folder, box 8, Varian Fry Papers, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University in the City of New York.

⁹¹ Miriam Davenport to Varian Fry, postcard, handwritten, 1965, “Fry Correspondence –

the passage of time and the significance of their work together, it was not until 1967 that the French Consulate in New York honored Fry for “his efforts on behalf of Europe’s resisters.”⁹² A few months later, when Fry died suddenly, Davenport wrote to Fry’s family, “I think Varian may once have save my life. Not at all in the way he saved thousands of others, but in the way a warm and concerned friend can, and should, save a life.”⁹³ Almost twenty-five years later, in April 1991, Gold sent U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum curator Sara Bloomfield a tribute to Fry and their time together. “The deepest aspect of his nature was a profound respect for the individual, and the rights of the individual. He never preached, but rather let the record speak,” she wrote. “This commitment stayed with him all his life.”⁹⁴ Fry clearly made a profound impact on their lives, but it was not, perhaps, because they needed to be changed: faced with a long wait in Marseille, Davenport and Gold engaged with the refugees, the black market and those who were committed to resistance in France in particular and in Europe as a whole. Charged with rescuing members of a group of cultural and intellectual elite, Gold and Davenport helped to facilitate a major operation that required expeditions into the

Miriam Davenport” folder, box 3, Varian Fry Papers, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University in the City of New York.

⁹² Polizzotti, *Revolution of the Mind*, 495

⁹³ Miriam Davenport to Annette Fry, et al., 2 November 1967, folder 425, box 22, Records Relating to the Development of “Assignment Rescue” (1993-1995), Office of Exhibitions, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Institutional Archives, Linthicum, Maryland.

⁹⁴ Mary Jayne Gold to Sarah Bloomfield, 1 April 1991, folder 855, box 49, Records Relating to the Development of “Assignment Rescue” (1993-1995), Office of Exhibitions, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Institutional Archives, Linthicum, Maryland.

territory of the Resistance and that resulted in the rescue of hundreds of unknown, uncelebrated souls—remaining themselves uncelebrated in the shadow of Varian Fry.

Margaret Collins Weitz observed that the friendships women made in the resistance were lifelong, regardless of individuals' political affiliations or socio-economic class.⁹⁵ Indeed, Davenport wrote that, "Mary Jayne Gold and I became friends at first sight; our friendship has lasted a lifetime."⁹⁶ Gold and Davenport continued to write to each other while Davenport was in Yugoslavia and Gold still in Marseille; the letters were often in code, which Gold dutifully tried to decode for the curators at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum who in the early 1990s were planning an exhibit about Varian Fry. Davenport made the friendship easy. When the two met, she was a young pragmatist, "following her heart across Europe in wartime, but ready to help anyone she met en route."⁹⁷ Gold brought her own brand of generosity to the friendship—as she had in the case of the refugees, she offered the money she had to someone who needed it. The parents of Davenport's fiancé begrudged her humble background, so to solve the problem, Gold wrote Davenport a letter posing as her Uncle Oscar, writing that her fictional Aunt Matilda had just died, leaving her a small fortune. (She closed the letter with a note encouraging her to return to the United States: "I know your generous instincts, my dear, but you had better give it up as a bad job and come home...") In March 1941, Gold wrote to Davenport saying she would cable a little bit of money that

⁹⁵ Weitz, *Sisters in the Resistance*, 302

⁹⁶ Ebel, "An Unsentimental Education," 11

⁹⁷ Sullivan, *Villa Air-Bel*, 177

“may help you from starving and appease the family.”⁹⁸ Then, later in August 1941, Gold airmailed the equivalent of \$500 to Davenport in Lisbon.⁹⁹

Interest in Fry has resurged in recent years, beginning, it appears, with the people involved with his work in Marseille. In the early 1990s, the new United States Holocaust Memorial Museum began work on an exhibit about Fry, the Emergency Rescue Committee, and the rescue of the Surrealist artists from Europe. The curators of the exhibit contacted both Davenport and Gold for information about the work. Gold had published a memoir in 1980, but Davenport’s essay about her experiences in French had never been published; the process of sharing memories with the curators seemed to spur both women to revisit their own place in the work, because both wrote to exhibit curators asking, in turn, for information for the books they were preparing. In a note to museum curator Sara Bloomfield, Davenport wrote, “I can’t tell you how happy I am to hear that he is to be honored, at long last, by his own country! Those of us who worked with him were just an energetic team of young people doing no more than what seemed to us like the right thing. Without him—*his* courage, tact, imaginative intelligence, unfailing sense of humor and extraordinary *presence* when dealing with officialdom, we’d have been lost.”¹⁰⁰ And, yet, what Davenport and Gold did during their time in Marseille reveals

⁹⁸ Mary Jayne Gold to Miriam Davenport, 5 March 1941

⁹⁹ Mary Jayne Gold to Miriam Davenport, telegram, 30 August, folder 841, box 48, Records Relating to the Development of “Assignment Rescue” (1993-1995), Office of Exhibitions, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Institutional Archives, Linthicum, Maryland.

¹⁰⁰ Emphasis original. Miriam Davenport to Sara Bloomfield, 13 February 1991, folder 424, box 21, Records Relating to the Development of “Assignment Rescue” (1993-1995),

much about the nature of resistance, the choice to participate in it, and the lasting commitment to the ideals, experiences and relationships that prompted that participation. Both Davenport and Gold played essential roles in the Emergency Rescue Committee by taking advantage of their relationships with each other, the United States and other Americans, and France and the French.

Chapter 4

HOW TO BE A SPY: RESISTANCE AS RECOVERY

Twenty-nine-year-old Pearl Witherington parachuted into France on a rainy night in late September 1943. Born in Paris in 1914 to British parents, Pearl Witherington had lived the first twenty-six years of her life in France, and she considered herself to be “British by birth and French by upbringing.” England’s Special Operations Executive had recruited her three months before that jump, and it had quickly become evident that she spoke French superbly, shot superlatively, and acted courageously. SOE commissioned Witherington to work as a courier between England and French resistance groups; she soon carried a makeup case in order to pass as a French cosmetics saleswoman, and rose to command three thousand resistance partisans. After the war, Witherington married a French resistance worker, Henri Cornioley, who had served as her second in command in France. In due time, she recommended her husband and ten other officers for the Croix de Guerre—recommendations that were all rejected. Instead, she was offered a civil MBE, an honor she declined, explaining with some hostility that none of her actions during the war had been remotely civil.¹

This chapter examines women who went to France “to encourage sabotage and subversion” through Winston Churchill’s Special Operations Executive, or SOE.

¹ Douglas Martin, “Pearl Cornioley, Resistance Fighter Who Opposed the Nazis, Is Dead at 93,” *New York Times*, 11 March 2008.

SOE coordinated a network of worldwide activities, seeking to collect information and to engender resistance among the citizens of occupied continental Europe, Asia, Africa, and South America.² Two sections of SOE were dedicated to work in France. The RF Section was reserved for French people who escaped to England and who wanted to help Charles de Gaulle; the F Section was composed of agents who were either half French or who could pass as such, and who were devoted to France. SOE agents participated in resistance work by helping escapees, aiding wounded resistance fighters, warning circuits of traps, feeding and hiding people—but, mainly, gathering information about the situation in occupied territories, arming and training resistance groups, and operating wireless radios.³ More female agents, like Pearl Witherington Cornioley, worked in France than in any other country, and their success relied on their abilities to pass as ordinary French women. Charged with “setting Europe ablaze,” in Churchill’s words, SOE agents were sent to France because they could pass as French citizens, carrying on where and as they were able.

This chapter explores the implications of training women simultaneously to organize, facilitate and encourage French people to participate in resistance activities

² Juliette Pattinson, *Behind Enemy Lines: Gender, Passing and the Special Operations Executive in the Second World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 2.

³ Marcel Ophuls’s celebrated documentary *Sorrow and the Pity* makes mention of British involvement in French resistance. In the beginning of the film’s second part, “The Choice,” Ophuls includes interviews with SOE leader Maurice Buckmaster and agent Denis Rake, a gay man who worked as a radio operator in SOE with a maquis operating around Mont-Mochet, in Auvergne. SOE is identified simply as the British Underground. English Flight Sergeant Evans also appeared and discussed his moustache, which he was instructed to shave off in order to appear more French. Evans said he was grateful to French people, who almost always helped him, despite the knowledge that the Germans would have shot them for helping the airman. Rake, on the other hand, suggested that while store workers and waiters were often helpful to him and to passing messages, they did not always understand that they were taking part in resistance activities.

directed at the German occupier, and to pass as French women in order to carry out their mission undetected by the enemy. It investigates the ways in which female SOE agents experienced the war and their undercover operations as a mission of recovery: to regain their adoptive country, to recuperate their losses, to re-establish their identities. Having been forced from France, SOE agents wished to recover it from Nazi hands, and since the end of the war, women agents have been engaged in a different sort of recovery mission, one that would demystify the reality of their work in SOE and would allow them to reclaim their memory of their wartime experience. While the study of SOE as a whole has been marked by “official histories” sponsored by the British government or the contributions of spy novelists, the slim historiography of women’s involvement has been characterized by a tendency to emphasize the elements of romance and adventure in their exploits in France. Since SOE has been the subject of numerous memoirs, biographies, monographs, novels and oral histories, the object of this chapter is to make a historiographical argument, examining female SOE agents within the study of clandestine work, generally, as well as the study of women’s participation in resistance, particularly, in France.

The Historiography of a Secret War

The agents, leaders and activities of Special Operations Executive have received a considerable amount of attention from writers ranging from academic historians to journalists and popular spy novelists. Most address, to some extent, the implications of SOE’s active relationship with radicals and Communists, the overall effectiveness of SOE on the tide of the war, and the impact of the Cold War on the

interpretation of the history of SOE. Almost all of them are steeped in adventure and mystique.⁴ The first histories of SOE were sponsored by the British government, which attempted to bury much of the details of SOE operations during World War II. These first historiographical endeavors suffered from the effects of what authorities deemed an accidental fire in SOE's Baker Street headquarters that destroyed much archival evidence. Then memoirs and biographies of former agents, both male and female, emerged, and these genres, focused on individual contributions, have remained the most prevalent mode of recording SOE's history. Male SOE agents have been more likely to write autobiographies, while female SOE agents have been more likely to be the subject of biographies written by other people—a difference that has raised questions about the obstacles to the construction of official and individual memory.⁵ In recent years, historians of SOE have confronted issues of gender, although those who have dealt with the role of gender in agents' lives are more likely to have been writers who lack formal training in historical methods.

The first history of SOE was researched and composed in the years just after the end of the war, but it was not made available to the public—or even to an audience larger than a very select set of individuals—until the last decade of the twentieth century. SOE Executive Director Colin Gubbins asked William Mackenzie, a Scottish professor of political science and a veteran of the Air Ministry, to write the history for the sake of the organization's leaders. Between 1945 and 1947, Mackenzie had access to otherwise

⁴ Julian Jackson has suggested that the networks with which SOE worked closely “incarnated the cloak-and-dagger aspects of the Resistance so familiar in the popular imagination.” See Julian Jackson, *France: The Dark Years, 1940-1944* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 409.

⁵ Pattinson, *Behind Enemy Lines*, 5

restricted sources and depended on oral histories with former agents. In his book, Mackenzie offered a detailed account of SOE in Europe, organized by country as well as by the progression of the overall organization and its leaders. Mackenzie asked if SOE altered the course of the war and concluded that SOE “was an instrument imperfect in various ways characteristic of the British; but it was an extremely powerful instrument.”⁶ In addition, he claimed that SOE set the tone for subversive wartime activity from then on. Mackenzie was careful to include Communist contributions to resistance efforts, giving credit where he deemed it was due. For decades there was no plan to publish the 800-page chronicle, on the grounds that the secrecy of the agency’s operations needed to be maintained in order for the government to continue clandestine work, and that Mackenzie’s treatment had been far too frank in its details.⁷ Following some editing, the work was finally published in 1998 as *The Secret History of SOE*. Until that point even Mackenzie was guarded about sharing the book with colleagues and friends.

In 1960, the British government commissioned British Army veteran and Professor of Modern History M. R. D. Foot to complete a history of SOE activities in France. When *SOE in France* appeared in 1966, it was the first SOE history to be published.⁸ Foot complained at the time that he had written it without access to the few surviving financial records and under the constant supervision of a former Special Intelligence Services officer. Conflict about SOE’s activities and legacy had been stewing

⁶ William J. M. Mackenzie, *The Secret History of SOE: The Special Operations Executive, 1940-1945* (London: St. Ermin’s Press, 2000), 745-746.

⁷ M. R. D. Foot, “Foreword,” in William Mackenzie, *The Secret History of SOE: The Special Operations Executive, 1940-1945* (London: St. Ermin’s Press, 2000), xii.

⁸ M. R. D. Foot, *SOE in France: An Account of the Work of the British Special Operations Executive in France, 1940-1944* (London: H. M. S. O, 1966).

since the war ended, and Foot provoked further fury and debate by targeting popular depictions of SOE and its agents' exploits during the war.

Widely acknowledged as the preeminent authority on SOE, Foot produced a second book about Special Operations Executive in 1984. More than half of *SOE: An Outline History of the Special Operations Executive, 1940-1946* is devoted to the explanation of organizational structure of SOE in relation to other British organs. Foot carefully described the techniques that Gubbins instituted during his tenure at the head of SOE from 1943 to 1946: providing training manuals in demolition, promoting guerrilla warfare, and advocating for a leadership style based on the notion that a leader would never send his people where he would not go himself.⁹ Foot argued that SOE operations diverted attention away from the immediate war front, changed how citizens of occupied countries viewed their occupiers, and developed new techniques of clandestine and underground warfare, but he did not suggest that SOE made the war end more quickly than it might have otherwise.¹⁰

Foot dedicated a chapter in *SOE: An Outline History of the Special Operations Executive, 1940-1946* to "what SOE was like," in which he described the need for agents to be brave in a way different from "battlefield bravery," because it involved a great deal of loneliness and unease. Foot wrote that good agents were good actors, but that "the ideal agent sank entirely into the surrounding populace, and never seemed to do anything in the least out of the common run; he was totally unobtrusive and inconspicuous, till there was a secret job to do, and that was best done out of anybody's

⁹ M. R. D. Foot, *SOE: An Outline History of the Special Operations Executive, 1940-1946* (London: British Broadcasting Company, 1984), 13-15.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 248-250

sight.”¹¹ One benefit of an agent’s mission was that he frequently had a lot of independence that allowed for adventure, and often felt as though his activities made a difference in the war.¹² Though he wrote generally about the activities of “men and women,” Foot rarely mentioned female agents, and did not discuss specific differences between what was required of them and of male agents.

France appeared prominently in *SOE: An Outline History of the Special Operations Executive, 1940-1946*, a fact Foot attributed to two circumstances: France’s centrality to SOE’s objectives in Europe, and the availability of sources on the French operations.¹³ When he wrote the introduction to Mackenzie’s tome in 1998, Foot acknowledged that, aside from a few details, he and Mackenzie did not disagree on the subject of France. Foot did, however, criticize Mackenzie for not properly addressing the complex implications of the leap into illegal work that most agents had to complete.¹⁴

Just as France was central to British efforts to stay German advances in Europe, so too was SOE at the heart of resistance movements across the continent and the globe. Enduring secrecy was, in turn, the crux of SOE’s success, a fact that Edinburgh University Professor Emeritus David Stafford acknowledged when he wrote *British and European Resistance, 1940-1945*, published in 1980. Stafford’s study of SOE began as an examination of the origins of the Cold War, which blossomed with his understanding that national resistance movements in Europe during World War II took place with

¹¹ Ibid, 165

¹² Ibid, 167

¹³ Ibid, 213

¹⁴ M. R. D. Foot, “Foreword,” in Mackenzie, xii-xv

British participation at the center and with SOE playing a key role in that connection. Stafford discussed three elements of SOE's place in historical thought: first, the Cold War climate of the post-World War II era which criticized SOE for having worked with radical revolutionaries; second, the imperial goals underlying British clandestine work in Europe during the war; and third, the effectiveness of SOE despite a lack of resources and the limitations imposed by the Foreign Office and the Secret Intelligence Service.¹⁵ Recognizing that much about SOE may never be known due to the primacy of secrecy, Stafford registered the silences in leaders' memoirs about the relationships between resistance movements and SOE, and in the official records of the time.

Efforts to give voice to those silences have attracted the interest of writers who focused on the sensational, romantic elements of SOE's work—including, in some cases, the participation of women. In *Secret War: the Story of SOE, Britain's Wartime Sabotage Organization* spy novelist Nigel West identified three reasons for interest in SOE's activities in France: the large number of casualties, the performance of SOE in France, and the use of women agents. On the subject of women agents, however, West only elaborated to the length of one paragraph, while the other two reasons receive a combined eight pages. West argued that SOE in general was a successful operation, since it delivered thousands of tons of supplies to those in France who needed it, but that the rivalry between SOE and SIS ensured that totalitarian regimes continued to rule Eastern Europe forty-five years after the end of the war.¹⁶ He suggested that some of SOE's major challenges lay in a defective system of communication, rigid compartmentalization at its

¹⁵ David Stafford, *Britain and European Resistance, 1940-1945: a Survey of the Special Operations Executive, with Documents* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980), 4-7.

¹⁶ West, 247

Baker Street headquarters, a deeply flawed practice of sending senior officers who had had access to classified information back out into the field as agents, and the lack of counter-intelligence available to agents or headquarters.¹⁷

Other writers interested in the SOE story have had to depend on the recollections of former agents, perhaps a choice made to compensate for a paucity of institutional archival sources related to SOE and for the writers' lack of formal training in historical methods. For the most part, these monographs have lacked sufficient critical analysis of agents' accounts and have depended on piquing readers' interests in compelling stories of espionage. In *F Section, SOE: The Buckmaster Networks*, French writer Marcel Ruby attempted to show "how honest citizens transformed themselves into redoubtable terrorists." To do so, Ruby traced the history of Maurice Buckmaster's F Section of SOE from spring 1941 until the Liberation, by chronicling "eyewitness accounts" of a handful of male former agents.¹⁸ The author of numerous books on the Resistance, Ruby framed the recollections in order to follow the agents' paths from the initial recruitment and training in England to the demands of clandestine life that included establishing contacts and organizing covert operations. Ruby's job was merely providing framework since he reproduced blocks of recollections from agents to illustrate different facets of SOE's operations in France, but provided little interpretation of their

¹⁷ Nigel West, *Secret War: The Story of SOE, Britain's Wartime Sabotage Organization* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1992), 121.

¹⁸ Marcel Ruby, *F Section, SOE: The Buckmaster Networks* (London: Leo Cooper, 1988), xi. Jean-Pierre Bloch, a former F Section agent, provided the foreword to Ruby's book, saying that as "an epic saga of the British secret service agents and SOE's Buckmaster groups, it makes for a thrilling story." See Bloch, in Ruby, *F Section, SOE* ix.

memories.¹⁹ Furthermore, he concluded, fairly uncritically, that SOE in France was “remarkably effective” despite the small numbers and young age of the agents.

Most notably, Ruby’s book included one recruit’s impressions of two women who have figured prominently in popular studies of the period. Vera Atkins, Buckmaster’s Intelligence Officer, seemed to transform “John Smith into Jacques Dupont” with an encyclopedic array of knowledge about life in wartime France and provided agents with crucial ephemera that made their cover stories believable and allowed the agents to truly pass as French.²⁰ *F Section, SOE: The Buckmaster Networks* also included an agent’s impressions of Virginia Hall, an American woman who might have easily stood out, with an artificial leg and an obvious American accent.²¹

¹⁹ See, for example, Pierre de Vomécourt’s account in Ruby, *F Section, SOE*, 17-32.

²⁰ Ruby, *F Section, SOE*, 54-55

²¹ Arthur L. Funk credited Virginia Hall as the first American operative in France. Well bred but strong willed, Hall studied in the United States, Paris and Vienna. She then easily passed the Foreign Service exams, but was told that as a woman she would never be sent abroad. Instead, she got a job as a clerk at embassies in Turkey and Warsaw in the 1930s; she lost a leg in a shooting accident during a hunting trip in Turkey in 1932. In 1939 she resigned from her post and went to England but the British Auxiliary Service wouldn’t accept her or any other American woman, perhaps only partly due to her handicap. The following year Hall went to Paris, where she enlisted as an ambulance driver for the French army. With the French defeat, she returned to England to work for the U.S. State Department. She was then recruited into the F section of the SOE and was sent to France to pose as a reporter. Her evaluators deemed her a good agent because she spoke French fluently and knew German and Italian. Hall soon moved to Lyon to set up the Heckler network; in addition, she briefed SOE agents, aided downed airmen, and wrote for the *New York Post* to try to awaken American awareness to the French situation. In November 1942, she fled France, only to be arrested in Spain; she was released in 1943, and returned to England, where SOE sent her to Spain for a year. Bored, Hall tried to transfer to the OSS but SOE sent her into France again. She organized guerrilla groups in central rural France, working under cover as a milkmaid in the weeks before D-Day as she helped coordinate intelligence from maquis groups. After the war Hall became one of the first female agents employed by the CIA. See Margaret Rossiter, *Women in the Resistance* (New York: Praeger, 1986), 190-195; see also Funk, 15, 20.

Nevertheless, Hall had been one of the first American agents in France, working first for the British Secret Intelligence Service and then serving as a mediator between agents in Lyons, a hotbed of resistance workers by the end of 1942, and SOE headquarters at Baker Street. She also provided food and shelter and contacts for agents when they first arrived in the city.²² Both women had captured the imagination of public audiences and writers from a variety of disciplines.²³

Like Ruby, English journalist Russell Miller recounted the story of SOE almost entirely through the words of those who had been involved, from recruiting and training officers to the agents themselves. Miller argued in *Behind the Lines* that as the war went on and agents with SOE and the American Office of Strategic Services became more experienced and better trained, they were more and more effective in breaking the morale of German soldiers and in building up resistance movements in occupied countries.²⁴ Miller included the recollections of Captain Selwyn Jepson, a recruiting officer who advocated for the recruitment of women. Jepson wrote, “In my view women were very much better than men for the work... All the women were satisfactory in training. They trained in classes with the men and it was noticeable that they were much better than the men in many of the skills that the work required. Funnily enough, they

²² Ruby, *F Section, SOE*, 63-68

²³ It has been suggested that Atkins was one of the inspirations for the character of M, James Bond’s superior. Sebastian Faulks has denied that his novel, *Charlotte Gray*, was based on any historical agent, although his reviewers have suggested Virginia Hall or Pearl Cornioley as his inspiration.

²⁴ Russell Miller, *Behind the Lines: The Oral History of Special Operations in World War II* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2002), 268.

took up pistol shooting with great ability.”²⁵ Miller neither ignored nor addressed specifically the role of women in SOE operations. He considered them among “the brave,” the “true adventurers,” to whom he dedicated his book.²⁶

Marcus Binney’s *The Women who Lived for Danger* set a new tone for the study of women agents in SOE. Binney addressed many of the same issues confronted by historians who preceded him in the realm of the history of spycraft, through a thoughtful narrative organized in chapters dedicated to specific agents. While he focused on the stories of a handful of already celebrated individuals, Binney provided some of the analysis that previous works had lacked. In the process, Binney asked “whether the use of irregulars undermined the basic rules of warfare” and whether the distinction could be drawn between freedom fighters and terrorists.²⁷ He emphasized the prime importance of secrecy, arguing that “their mission was to pass themselves off as ordinary citizens” and that women agents could move about more freely than men because of the labor conscriptions to which French men were subjected.²⁸ Throughout the book, however, Binney’s tone wavers between patronizing and idealizing, from the first sentence of the book, when he refers to the women as “girls.”²⁹ Throughout he expressed a sort of

²⁵ quoted in Miller, *Behind the Lines*, 11.

²⁶ *Ibid*, xii

²⁷ Marcus Binney, *The Women Who Lived for Danger: The Agents of the Special Operations Executive* (New York: William Morrow, 2002), 332. Binney profiles Christina Granville, Virginia Hall, Lise de Baissac, Noor Inayat Khan, Pearl Witherington, Paddy O’Sullivan, Violette Szabo, Marguerite “Peggy” Knight, Paola Del Din, and Alix d’Unienville.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 4

surprised admiration for women's accomplishments as agents. While he concluded that SOE leaders were "wildly over-optimistic" concerning activities in France, Binney proclaimed that "women had never had such a role to play before, yet again and again they surprised their comrades with their astonishing mastery of clandestine life."³⁰

It was not until the first decade of the twenty-first century that literature emerged significantly about women participating in French resistance as a whole, and since then biographies have proliferated.³¹ While they have attempted to record the history of SOE through the stories of SOE agents, biographers of SOE's women agents have been remiss in their attention to the effects of power, gender, nationality, and memory in the narratives that are recorded. The examples of Ruby and Miller suggest that biographers of women agents have not been critical enough in their historical inquiry; Binney provides just one example of heavy-handed romanticization of his sources and subjects.

Two biographies of Vera Atkins provide, perhaps, a more extreme example of the romanticization of female undercover agents during World War II. William Stevenson and Sarah Helm published biographies of Vera Atkins within two years of each other. Reviewer Rita Kramer criticized Stevenson's biography of Atkins, entitled *Spymistress: The Life of Vera Atkins, the Greatest Female Secret Agent of World War II*, for several reasons, not least because Helm had already exhaustively researched and

²⁹ Ibid, 1. His condescension is surprising perhaps most of all because his mother worked as a code-breaker in the British war effort during World War II.

³⁰ Binney, *The Women Who Lived for Danger*, 331, 337

³¹ Pattinson is a notable exception to the critique in this section. Her monograph, *Behind Enemy Lines: Gender, Passing and the Special Operations Executive in the Second World War*, dealt with complex issues involved in passing as French.

produced a biography of Atkins using Atkins's personal papers and recently declassified government files—leaving little room for additional interpretation of Atkins' life.³² In any case, Stevenson's memoir of Atkins paled in comparison to Helm's biography, in terms of scholarship, argument, and basic historiographical decorum. In the beginning of the book, for example, Stevenson—a Canadian writer who later published *A Man Called Intrepid* in 1976, about compatriot and British intelligence spymaster William Stephenson—described Atkins in lurid, eroticized terms. By contrast, in her own biography, Helm asserted that Atkins was more astute than her superior, Maurice Buckmaster—and that she harbored a dangerous secret of her own. While Atkins had been immersed in English and French culture, she was legally a German Jew and not an English citizen, and thus an enemy alien. And even when she disagreed with Buckmaster's decision, she could not argue with him, because she needed his support in order to apply, eventually, for citizenship. Helm further suggested that it might have been out of guilt from not questioning some of Buckmaster's decisions that led Atkins to comb Europe after the war for information about the fates of the women agents who died there.

The historiography of women who served as SOE agents in France in particular has been built, for the most part, by writers interested in the romantic, adventurous elements of the history, and who are intrigued by the idea of women enlisting in an organization that required them to risk their lives every day. The

³² Rita Kramer, review of *Spymistress: The Life of Vera Atkins, the Greatest Female Secret Agent of World War II*, by William Stevenson, *Journal of Military History* 71 (July 2007): 954. See Sarah Helm, *A Life in Secrets* (Boston: Little, Brown, 2005). Rita Kramer is the author of *Flames in the Field: The Story of Four SOE Agents in Occupied France*. Written poetically, Kramer's own work profiles four of the thirteen women agents who did not return from their missions in France. See Kramer, *Flames in the Field: The Story of Four SOE Agents in Occupied France* (New York: Penguin Books, 1995).

ubiquitous use of epithets like “the greatest female spy” and claims to be telling the “true” story suggest a tension between emphasizing the significance of women’s contributions to SOE operations and emphasizing the adventurous exploits involved in going undercover during wartime.³³ As a result, SOE veterans like Pearl Witherington have participated in a kind of recovery of their own memory through consistent opposition to popular interpretations of their experiences.

To be an Agent

Both Great Britain and the United States operated intelligence and underground initiatives in France and throughout the rest of occupied Europe. In England, Winston Churchill ordained the Special Operations Executive, an office distinct from the existing British Intelligence, on July 22, 1940. Churchill charged the new, secret agency to organize subversion, sabotage, and an underground army in Europe. He appointed Hugh Dalton, the Minister of Economic Warfare at the time, to oversee the new agency, with the charge to “set Europe ablaze!”³⁴ Soon afterwards, Dalton laid out his expectations for SOE: “We need absolute secrecy, a certain fanatical enthusiasm, willingness to work with people of different nationalities, complete political

³³ See, for example, Judith Pearson, *The Wolves at the Door: The True Story of America’s Greatest Female Spy* (Guilford, CT: The Lyons Press, 2005). On the other hand, other titles have underlined the “quiet” femininity of women agents. See, for example, Liane Jones, *A Quiet Courage: The Story of SOE’s Women Agents in France* (New York: Bantam Dell, 1989).

³⁴ Stella King, ‘*Jacqueline*,’ *Pioneer Heroine of the Resistance* (London: Arms and Armour Press, 1989), 49.

reliability...”³⁵ There were four sections of the SOE in France: F, composed of agents who were operating independently of de Gaulle and who either were half-French or had spent a good deal of time there; RF, who were Gaullist and whose agents were all French; EU/P, who were Poles in France; and D/F, who worked with escape lines and clandestine communication. Operations in France were always the largest, but SOE was in contact with resistance networks in other Nazi-occupied countries in Europe by November 1941. That same month Maurice Buckmaster was appointed head of the F section, with Vera Atkins serving as his Intelligence Officer.³⁶

When France first fell in June 1940, the American government responded by recognizing Pétain’s government at Vichy and by diplomatically and clandestinely working with the Resistance. Franklin Delano Roosevelt created the Office of Strategic Services on June 13, 1942, and the OSS employed many of SOE’s training strategies. The North African invasion in November 1942 presented a crossroads for American involvement in military resistance in France, and there seemed to be four possibilities for future work: The United States could develop a relationship with the Resistance from North Africa, from the countries bordering France, particularly Spain and Switzerland, from London through already-established contacts outside of SOE, or from London in cooperation with the British Intelligence operation.

Until 1943, division marked resistance work in France, as some favored de Gaulle, other groups opted to work with the British, and still others rejected the politics espoused by some of the movements. Gaullists necessarily had to cooperate with the SOE

³⁵ quoted in King, *Jacqueline*, 45

³⁶ *Ibid*, 55

because it supplied equipment and transportation; other factions looked to the Americans. By the end of 1943, American and British underground efforts had converged, when the United States could no longer endorse the Vichy government, nor deny “the effectiveness of clandestine, guerilla tactics.”³⁷ American officials decided that aid to the French Resistance would help the British, and American diplomats passed information—sometimes accurate and sometimes, unbeknownst to the passers, false—from Vichy to London. Unlike the female SOE agents, the women who enlisted in the OSS were not originally intended to go overseas or to go behind enemy lines; they were supposed to be filing, decoding messages, encoding messages, keeping records.³⁸

Early on, SOE recruited agents on an invitation-only basis, and agents recommended people they knew to be considered for recruitment. Fifty-two women, a majority of those commissioned for service in SOE, were sent into France.³⁹ Undercover work through SOE required several key characteristics in its agents. Crucial characteristics included excellent command of languages, physical fitness, intelligence, adaptability, and the ability to act the part required to maintain a cover story.⁴⁰ All of the women who worked in France as SOE agents were fluent in French language and culture, and had close ties to France, through their parents, their childhoods, or their marriages. Agents were motivated by a variety of reasons to accept recruitment: historians have

³⁷ Arthur Layton Funk, “American Contacts with the Resistance in France, 1940-1943,” *Military Affairs* 34 (February 1970): 15-18.

³⁸ Elizabeth McIntosh, *Sisterhood of Spies: Women of the OSS* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1998), 6, 11.

³⁹ Binney, *The Women Who Lived for Danger*, 1-2, 336; Pattinson, *Behind Enemy Lines*, 26

⁴⁰ Binney, *The Women Who Lived for Danger*, 4-7

often cited the maternal instinct of female agents to protect their children, anger after the death of a spouse, the compulsion of a family legacy of rejecting totalitarian regimes, or simply the desire to defend the homeland.⁴¹ Juliette Pattinson has argued that female SOE agents were not naïve about their situation; rather, “they were highly motivated, often driven by the desire for revenge and hatred for the Germans, were alert to dangers they faced, were determined to progress with their missions despite the obstacles that were put in their way.”⁴² Loyalty to Britain was paramount as far as recruiters were concerned, and loyalty to family relationships was foremost in women’s minds.

For the most part, women agents worked as couriers, wireless operators, saboteurs, arms instructors, recruiters and circuit organizers; because of the nature of their work, couriers and wireless operators were exposed daily to dangerous situations in which it was required that they pass as French citizens.⁴³ Women were considered as agents because they might arouse less suspicion and move around the country more freely, since the threat of the obligatory work orders mandated by the Vichy government limited men’s mobility. All of the women were commissioned in either the Women’s Auxiliary Air Force or First Aid Nursing Yeomanry, overt auxiliary sections of the British Army, but since they were not in uniform, they risked arrest and execution as spies.⁴⁴ In 1940 women’s participation in warfare was not widely accepted; Nigel West has pointed out that Germany did not engage women to the same extent that England did.

⁴¹ Pattinson, *Behind Enemy Lines*, 43-45

⁴² *Ibid*, 10

⁴³ *Ibid*, 34

⁴⁴ Binney, *The Women Who Lived for Danger*, 9. In fact, of the fifty-two women who went to France as agents, seventeen were arrested.

Most recruits had not been in France at the time of the Occupation, and most had no experience in resistance work, though many had reason to despise Germany.⁴⁵ Ultimately what appears to be a common characteristic to most, if not all, female agents was the intent to inflict “real damage on the enemy.”⁴⁶

Clandestine work through SOE allowed women to exact revenge on an enemy guilty of violating a nation with which these women identified their political and personal loyalties. One scholar claimed that SOE agents remained “resolutely non-political” in their work in France, allying themselves only with resistance groups that sought to subvert the German occupiers.⁴⁷ Officially, the enemy was the German occupier, but for some, the enemy was the Vichy State as well—responsible for collaborationist policies that betrayed France’s long history as a defender of the rights of man. Resisters’ dual opposition was, in fact, profoundly political, since it entailed defiance of a dangerous invader and a treacherous government. This motivation to participate in resistance constituted a kind of recovery as agents attempted to regain their adoptive country: it allowed non-French women to retrieve and salvage a connection to a home in France, embodied by a piece of land or another human being. Many of them had been forced to leave France for England in the aftermath of France’s fall. Once they returned to France, agents had to convincingly perform French nationality in order to survive and succeed in their clandestine mission.

⁴⁵ Pattinson, *Behind Enemy Lines*, 28, 41

⁴⁶ Binney, *The Women Who Lived for Danger*, 2

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 330

Passing Though Liminal Space

The women recruited and deployed by SOE faced a gendered dilemma of self-representation. Before all else, they had to pass as ordinary French women. A failure to pass as French could have disastrous consequences: Devereaux Rochester was sent back to England in March 1944 because she looked too English; on a later mission, she was arrested in Paris. In her study of female SOE agents, Juliette Pattinson focused on the implications of gender and on the experience of “passing” as French civilians, and highlighted in particular the ways in which these agents temporarily destabilized gender norms during the war.⁴⁸ This idea of passing helps explain how these women understood or confronted gendered expectations of work and family through their resistance activities, but also how they navigated the divergent demands of the combative nature of the mission in France and the conservative disposition of the character they were assigned to play in the field.

It is important to pay attention to the complicated military facet of resistance work, even as historians now include everyday activities in the range of resistance activities. Resistance in France came to be organized in two groups. Movements were often grassroots-oriented groups composed of friends and acquaintances who shared political beliefs or patriotic sentiments. *Réseaux*—networks or circuits—were set up under SOE’s and de Gaulle’s direction from London. Members of de Gaulle’s *réseaux* were in fact soldiers, and until March 1941 de Gaulle viewed the Resistance from an entirely military position, mostly ignoring the movements in the interior of France.⁴⁹ The

⁴⁸ Pattinson, *Behind Enemy Lines*, 12

⁴⁹ Weitz, *Sisters in the Resistance*, 62, and Jackson, *France: The Dark Years*, 409.

martial nature of resistance, however, was not foreign to the members of France's movements, or to the British organizers of Special Operations Executive. Because of this, SOE women recruits initially received shorter, less rigorous training than men but soon it became clear that they were capable of training for the same assignments.⁵⁰ Pearl Witherington proved the military nature of her assignment and training. After she joined SOE on June 8, 1943, Witherington completed the three-week training to glowing reports. Her first simulation exercises went poorly at first, however, although she succeeded in her third exercise.⁵¹

Marcus Binney expressed concern that, through the use of clandestine operations, SOE contributed to the subversion of long-held rules of warfare—including the role of women in war. Because some considered resistance work in France to be combative, women should not have participated. Perhaps more importantly, women in combat violated deeply entrenched cultural norms.⁵² As if to mitigate that subversion, Binney identified SOE agents—male and female—as freedom fighters and rejected any

⁵⁰ Pattinson, *Behind Enemy Lines*, 52, and West, *Secret War*, 111. In 1941, Sergeant Les Fernandez began training agents in the newly formed SOE. He was primarily responsible for the agents' physical training and he led long hikes, exercises, team games, and pre-parachute training, as well as teaching close combat skills, the art of concealment, and escape and evasion techniques. Fernandez believed that women were unsuited physically for combat, although he thought that women possessed intellectual strength that allowed them to excel at "slipping into a role and 'living' a cover story." During the following year, in 1942, the F section recruiting officer was Selwyn Jepson, who was willing to let women get involved in combat, believing them to be useful in clandestine work, despite taboos, and it was purportedly Virginia Hall's activities and bravery that had convinced him that women were capable of handling undercover work. See "Captain Les Fernandez," *Daily Telegraph*, 1 October 2009, and King, 'Jacqueline,' 74.

⁵¹ Binney, *The Women Who Lived for Danger*, 186

⁵² Pattinson, *Behind Enemy Lines*, 25

implication that they were terrorists.⁵³ What Binney did not interrogate is the implications of what was expected of SOE's women agents. SOE did not invent guerrilla warfare, but rather transformed it through the recruitment of women agents. SOE's women agents were both freedom fighters and terrorists on some level: freedom fighters, in the sense that they sought to liberate a nation and ultimately a continent from the grip of Fascist hands, and terrorists in the sense that they violently ruptured institutionalized Western cultural expectations for political and personal reasons. These agents organized the means to recover France from German hands and to liberate her, even as their activities as women both depended on and defied a cultural (and, under Petain's regime, political) understanding of women's roles that rejected any right to liberation on an individual level.

Even as they received less rigorous physical and martial training than their male counterparts, female SOE agents were meticulously prepared with the skills necessary to go undercover, believably, as a French woman. This was not difficult since women in the R/F section were, *de rigueur*, French nationals, and women in the F section were often half French, married to Frenchmen, former students of the French education

⁵³ Binney, *The Women Who Lived for Danger*, 332 See especially his concluding paragraph, 337. In *The Sorrow and the Pity*, people from different wartime milieus used different language to refer to members of the Resistance. In recounting the bombing of a cinema, for example, former members of the Resistance and former German officers referred to the bombers as "partisans," while the cinema owner referred to them as "terrorists." Russian Anna Marly's song, "Chant des Partisans," became an anthem for the maquis after Marly performed it on the BBC in 1943, and some petitioned for it to become the national hymn. Particularly poignant are the lyrics of the third stanza: "C'est nous qui brisons les barreaux des prisons, pour nos frères/ La haine à nos trousses, et la faim qui nous pousse, la misère/ Il y a des pays où les gens au creux des lits font des rêves/ Ici, nous, vois-tu, nous on marche et nous on tue, nous on crève." See Richard Raskin, " 'Le Chant des Partisans': Functions of a Wartime Song," *Folklore* 102 (1991): 62-76.

system, or French women who had become British by marriage (a circumvention of citizenship regulations of de Gaulle's RF section, which attempted to hire only and all French national recruits). In all cases, it was necessary to make certain that agents could fool the people they would encounter while on their mission: they needed to speak French and look French. The test began with the interview portion of the recruitment process, during which potential agents were invited to interview for a seemingly innocuous position. Interviewers conducted the interview in French to determine the recruit's language proficiency. In order to establish the second piece—looking French—recruits were trained not only in physical but also behavioral exercises: drinking and eating habits, dress and hair styles, reflexive language use when talking in their sleep. Finally, before leaving on assignment, female, as well as male, agents wrote a will under their own name and identity and then received a new, French identity: a cover story, identification cards, a birth certificate, ration cards, travel permits, and field names.⁵⁴

To some extent the often-contradictory task of training women to pass as French women but also to participate in clandestine warfare meant a recovery of the boundaries of their gendered identity: female agents reshaped and, in the years following the war, asserted what it meant for them to be women according to their experience as secret agents of subversive change. Juliette Pattinson has argued that, both “strategic and empowering... femininity was indeed the best disguise.”⁵⁵ This *genre* of recovery facilitated the kinds of self-reflection represented by Pearl Witherington's refusal of a civil honor: having integrated the expectations of womanhood into the expectations of

⁵⁴ Pattinson, *Behind Enemy Lines*, 27-33, 66, 77

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 153

war, Witherington rejected the notion that her gender precluded her from military service. In order to successfully carry out their mission, female agents of SOE had to convince the people they encountered that they belonged in France. They needed to conform to the gender norms shared by the Germans and the French, a camouflage of womanhood that aroused fewer suspicions of subversive activities. That conformity meant adopting French women's expected everyday activities as their own, and incorporating them into their mission.⁵⁶ As women, then, female SOE agents occupied a liminal space between uniformed soldiers trained in combat techniques and French women who carried out resistance activities through the continuation of their everyday activities.

Pearl Witherington's experience during and following the Occupation provides a prime example of resistance through SOE as a kind of recovery. Witherington's family fled Paris soon after the German invasion and in July 1941 they arrived in London. There Witherington worked for the Air Ministry while seeking ways to return to France, "propelled," according to one biographer, "by a burning sense of anger at the occupation of France."⁵⁷ In June 1943 she was recruited and trained by SOE. Witherington said later, "Having been in the Girl Guides proved very helpful. We learned to use explosives and did a lot of firearms training. I was quite a good shot."⁵⁸ Pearl Witherington's first official mission was to begin on September 13, 1943, as a courier for "Hector," or Maurice Southgate, a circuit organizer around Tarbes, in the southwestern

⁵⁶ For example, Virginia Hall posed as a milkmaid in a rural village for cover in the months leading up to the Normandy invasion. She spent her days tending the cows and organizing local resistance forces.

⁵⁷ Binney, *The Women Who Lived for Danger*, 185

⁵⁸ "Pearl Cornioley," *Daily Telegraph*, February 26, 2008.

corner of the country. Armed with near-native fluency in French and her gun, Witherington parachuted into the country in which she had spent the majority of her life up to that point. Her fiancé had joined Southgate's band, and Henri Cornioley and Pearl Witherington were reunited upon her successful, if soggy, jump into France on a windy September night.

Almost immediately, plans changed. Witherington obtained an authentic identity card through her future father-in-law to replace the false one she had received in England. The new documents identified her as a cosmetic saleswoman for a company that knew who she was and the work she was doing, and that listed her in their books as an employee. Maurice Southgate was to become her commander, and she was supposed to carry messages for him and to contact a French colonel about supplying materiel for him. Three weeks after her arrival, Southgate returned to England for what lengthened to three months; in the intervening time Witherington ran the Stationer circuit, often frustrated by the lack of training on the part of the sabotage parties.⁵⁹ When Southgate was arrested by the Gestapo a month before D-Day, Witherington commanded the network once again, dividing it in half and taking over the northern part, renamed Wrestler.⁶⁰ In June 1944, her unit interrupted more than eight hundred times a railway connecting southern France and Normandy, and the Germans purportedly offered a one-million-franc reward for her capture. Witherington later held that the closest she came to death actually occurred when another Resistance group failed either to provide a password, or to recognize any of the code names she offered to authenticate herself.

⁵⁹ Binney, *The Women Who Lived for Danger*, 186-190

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 191-197

In the post-war years, an adversary of another dimension emerged: an enemy informed by gender discrimination in military honors and romanticism in cultural memory. Remembrance of SOE experiences constructed an altered representation of them, and begged for recovery. Immediately following the war, SOE agents began publishing memoirs. F section head Maurice Buckmaster published *Specially Employed* in 1952, which he admitted in the foreword included factual inaccuracies. Six years later, Jean Overton Fuller, friend and biographer of fallen SOE agent Noor Inayat Khan, uncovered serious criticism about the integrity of the F section. Despite widespread suspicions about SOE in the decade following the war, British government officials remained mum on the issue of SOE; at the end of 1958, a junior minister in the Foreign Office, John Profumo, announced that he would appoint someone to investigate the criticisms of SOE, which caused some political turmoil.⁶¹

Women recruited into SOE did not receive training equal to men's, and the recognition of their service has not been equal, either.⁶² A recovery of memory constitutes a facet of resistance, by challenging the process of forgetting. Female agents have received a considerable amount of biographical attention, while their male counterparts have received both greater historiographical and commemorative recognition from governments. In reclaiming their memory, women who worked for SOE have adjusted national and international imaginations about the memorial legacy of World War II, the occupation of France, and resistance.

⁶¹ West, *Secret War*, 2-4

⁶² Pattinson, *Behind Enemy Lines*, 26; Hélène Eck, "Les Françaises sous Vichy: femmes du désastre – citoyennes par désastre?" in *Histoire des femmes en occident, 5: le xxe siècle*, ed. Georges Duby and Michelle Perrot (Paris: Plon, 1992), 206.

Women's participation in SOE operations in France uncovers several lines of inquiry related to the legacy of the French Resistance. It speaks to the international nature of resistance activities in France, as well as to the very personal motivations and Francophilia that led women—both French and non-French—to act in defiance of Vichy authorities and German occupiers. In this way, the experience and motivations of women who worked with SOE in France elucidate what motivated women to participate in Resistance efforts in France, as well as the limits of exclusive categories of resistance with regard to nationality and patriotism.

Popular representations and written memoirs of female SOE veterans also reveal a great deal about the impact of gendered social mores on the memory of the resistance in France. At the time of the German Occupation of France, a majority of French women themselves seemed to adhere to a traditional set of cultural mores especially with regard to gender, which were generally shared throughout Western Europe. As other historians have noted, women's participation in a paramilitary organization complicated the gender norms upheld by Germany, France and England. Novelists and film writers have been interested in the stories of the women who infiltrated France as secret agents, to a much greater extent than they have been interested in the stories of their male counterparts.⁶³ Speculation over the identity of the agent upon whom Sebastian Faulks based his romantic adventure novel *Charlotte Gray* generally points to Pearl Witherington Cornioley, who adamantly insisted that romance had little to do with her decision to return to France. "There was a job to be done. I didn't put my life

⁶³ Pattinson, *Behind Enemy Lines*, 7-9

at risk just so I could be with Henri,” she told the *Daily Telegraph* in 2002.⁶⁴

Witherington was awarded the military MBE in 1945, the CBE in 2004, and her Parachute Wings in 2006, sixty years after she had earned them. She published her autobiography, *Pauline*, titled with her clandestine name, in 1997. Witherington wrote later, “I don’t consider myself a heroine. Not at all. I am just an ordinary person who did her job during the war.”⁶⁵ But the women of SOE in France were not merely ordinary women. For the first time, women entered into combative situations; at the same time, they were expected to play a role convincingly and constantly in order to pass as ordinary French women. Their experiences illuminate much about resistance in France, as well as the recovery of its memory.

⁶⁴ “Pearl Cornioley,” *New York Times* obituary. Faulks in turn has said that Charlotte Gray was based less on any one agent than on his own imaginary creation.

⁶⁵ “Pearl Cornioley,” *Daily Telegraph* obituary, February 26, 2008

Chapter 5

CONCLUSION

In the memoir he published just after the end of World War II, Varian Fry related the story of his detainment on the *Sinaia* alongside Mary Jayne Gold and some of their refugee clients, and when Gold told it in an oral history interview in 1991, she recounted the story in nearly the same words and tone in which Fry had described it. This rehearsed remembering recurred throughout her oral history interview, raising questions about the authenticity of the interview itself. Sometimes this rehearsal emerged through a fault in the method of the interview. When the interviewer, for example, asked about her role in involving Danny Bénédite with the Emergency Rescue Committee, Gold responded, “We’ve already been through this, but I’ll go through it again.” Sometimes, this rehearsal surfaced as a result of failures in the recording equipment. In one instance, Gold had to repeat the account of her trip to the internment camp at Le Vernet, so interviewer prompted her to begin where the tape left off. Identifying it with its punch line—“You want that story, ‘It was cleaner in Dachau?’”—Gold recounted essentially the same story, sometimes using precisely the same words.¹

¹ Mary Jayne Gold, Oral History interview, 10 April 1991, Tape 1, Varian Fry Collection, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, D.C.

While Mary Jayne Gold was no naïve interviewee—she paid attention to the ways in which the historiography of the Occupation was unfolding—she was not always certain that she could contribute to anything more than an understanding of life during the Occupation.² In her memoirs of her life in France in 1940, she wrote:

To me, the war... has always seemed to be the central crisis in the history of our time, and everything else mere prologue or epilogue. This is a personal feeling; it is not even an opinion. Many good accounts have been written, [sic] histories, biographies, memoirs. I know the cast, the plot, and how the drama ends. But I'm always eager to find a new book. I never tire of filling in new details or reading the old ones. The main protagonists, the public figures, have become familiar friends or enemies. Sometimes I gain a new insight and undergo a slight shift of opinion, but in every new account I follow the story as if for the first time. I'm repeatedly appalled at the unpreparedness and the outmoded strategy of the French general staff, their inefficiency and lack of faith, and can hardly believe the actions of the slick, or blind, opportunists who wanted to end the Third Republic.³

Familiar with historiographical discussion of the period, Gold was clearly conversant with her colleagues' memoirs, since Fry's and her treatments were nearly identical. She was also acquainted with Miriam Davenport's memory of their shared time in Marseille in 1940, since the two exchanged letters and visits in the years following the war. When the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum approached the two women in 1991 to provide information for an exhibit about Varian Fry and the Emergency Rescue Committee, they both provided copies of photographs and letters. Gold may indeed have realized the challenges as well as the importance of her reminiscences. She

² With a packet of letters, Gold sent a note to a museum curator saying that she thought they would only be interesting to a graduate student trying to understand ordinary life during the Occupation. Mary Jayne Gold to Anita Kassof, 24 May 1991, folder 855, box 49, Records Relating to the Development of "Assignment Rescue" (1993-1995), Office of Exhibitions, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Institutional Archives, Linthicum, Maryland.

³ Mary Jayne Gold, *Crossroads Marseilles, 1940* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980), 44.

wrote later, “When I try to recapture and write about what happened and what I saw, it turns out to be a series of double exposures, and I have to take them apart and fit them together again to make sense... Thank God for the recollection of the determined little band that helped arrange [the refugees’] passage.”⁴ Those recollections are important, in fact, because they convey an understanding of life during the Occupation. They relate what historian Maggie Allison has suggested: that resistance and attesting to that resistance are “a permanent fight.”⁵

Before Miriam Davenport and Mary Jayne Gold, Alice Resch and Pearl Witherington, there was Lucie Aubrac. The wife of Raymond Aubrac, the leader of the Libération-Sud movement, Lucie Aubrac was a key player in the Resistance in her own right. After the war, the Aubracs became outspoken proponents of the legacy of the French Resistance, strictly defined, and representatives of all resisters—both men and women—in the movement. Encouraged by fellow female resisters and the national trials of war criminals, Lucie Aubrac published her memoirs in 1984. After Klaus Barbie’s trial in 1987—a turning point in French historical consciousness concerning the Occupation, Resistance and Collaboration—both Aubracs fell under scrutiny for their actions and their versions of events. Indeed, the Aubracs defended the honor of the Resistance and the significance of French women’s participation in it to a fault, but Lucie Aubrac also

⁴ *Crossroads Marseilles*, 147-148

⁵ Maggie Allison, “From the Violence of War to the War against Intolerance: Representing the Resistant Woman, Lucie Aubrac,” *South Central Review* 19.4 (Winter 2002-Spring 2003): 130.

imagined that women's contributions to the Resistance—"regular humanitarian gestures and quick thinking"—unified the Resistance as a whole.⁶

How are the memoirs of non-French women in conversation with the myths set out by Lucie Aubrac, who helped cement the "official" remembering and forgetting of the Occupation and Resistance? As if filling the gaps in critical historical work on non-French women's contributions to resistance, women in the SOE, AFSC and CAS have written and published memoirs to describe their own experiences. Some memoirs, like Alice Resch's, take the form of diaries or letters, couching their narratives of often intensely dangerous work in forms less assertive than a direct autobiography. Like Lucie Aubrac's memory work, memoirs pose the problems of selective, subjective memory recorded at a distance from the events themselves. As the Aubracs' situation evidenced, memoirs can also be a political tool for shaping official memory, as well as a by-product of a particular political and social moment.

The methods of oral history pose their own set of problems. Theorists of oral history have called for increased awareness in the field of history of the unique ways in which women explain their pasts, because such awareness allows historians to better understand the parameters of women's experiences of that past. To that end, women's stories must be contextualized within dominant ideologies, to "unravel the apparently contradictory effects of ideology and experience."⁷ Particularly important to the construction of memory are the effects of gender and class, which have made women

⁶ Allison, "From the Violence of War to the War against Intolerance," 120-122

⁷ Joan Sangster, "Telling Our Stories: Feminist Debates and the Use of Oral History," *The Oral History Reader*, ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (New York: Routledge, 1998), 91.

more likely than men to overlook their own accomplishments and to emphasize family. An informant's awareness of history and its effects on politics will in turn affect her story of the past: she will be more likely to tell a story that follows a narrative in harmony with presently-held viewpoints.⁸

Julian Jackson has suggested that “the future of the history of the Resistance needs to embrace its full diversity—Gaullist and non-Gaullist, Communist and non-Communist, North and South, men and women, French and immigrants.”⁹ He might have added non-French nationals. By showing how relief, rescue and recovery work were integrally related to resistance in France during the Occupation, this thesis has attempted to demonstrate the form and significance of the contributions of non-French women to that resistance. As they provided relief to Jews and other internees across unoccupied France, the workers of the American Friends Service Committee necessarily engaged in resistance when it became clear that Vichy's policies were at odds with their fundamental commitment to human rights. Determined to save anonymous as well as celebrated people threatened by the Nazi and Vichy administrations, the members of the Centre Américain de Secours in Marseille treated rescue work and resistance work as if they were inextricably linked. For the women who worked as agents for England's Special Operations Executive in France, recovery was multilayered, as they sought to return to their adoptive home and to liberate France, and later to reclaim their stories of resistance as more than simply tales of adventure and romantic exploits.

⁸ Devon Lummis, “Structure and Validity,” *The Oral History Reader*, ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (New York: Routledge, 1998), 276.

⁹ Julian Jackson, *France: The Dark Years, 1940-1944* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 20.

In November 1993, Mary Jayne Gold wrote to Susan Morgenstein, Director of Special Exhibitions at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, announcing that she was interested in publishing a French version of her memoir. She asked for more information and documentation—part of which she had supplied during the development of the museum’s exhibit about Varian Fry and the Emergency Rescue Committee’s work in Marseille.¹⁰ Gold was not the first to express such interest. Two years before the opening of the Fry exhibit, to which she also had contributed a significant amount of time, memory and personal ephemera, Miriam Davenport hesitated to donate her material permanently to the archives at the U.S Holocaust museum. She wrote to one of the curators, “If I sign on the dotted line, will I still be able to *freely* use what I give to you for my own projected sequel to the manuscript I left with Susan (*An Unsentimental Education*)? I’m beginning to think that I should try to publish my own story—a sort of worms-eye-view [*sic*] of the 20th century (and I have kept Xerox copies of all the materials that I sent to Washington).”¹¹ Even as they dedicated their efforts to the exhibit, Davenport and Gold realized that they could tell their own story, and that people would, finally, listen.

¹⁰ Mary Jayne Gold to Susan Morgenstein, 5 November 1993, folder 1040, box 59, Records Relating to the Development of “Assignment Rescue” (1993-1995), Office of Exhibitions, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Institutional Archives, Linthicum, Maryland.

¹¹ Miriam Davenport to Anita Kassof, 19 June 1991, folder 423, box 21, Records Relating to the Development of “Assignment Rescue” (1993-1995), Office of Exhibitions, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Institutional Archives, Linthicum, Maryland.

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