



## Saints and Liars: The Untold Stories of Americans Who Saved Endangered People from the Nazis

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Few of the Americans who hurtled into action on behalf of the Nazis' victims are known today. People like Martha and Waitstill Sharp, Moses Beckelman, Laura Margolis, Marjorie McClelland, Burritt Hiatt, and Elisabeth and Robert Dexter elicit hardly a flicker of recognition. Not even Varian Fry, who earned the honor of a U.S. postage stamp, prompts a wide nod. Yet we continue to face the greatest refugee crisis since the Nazi era and exemplars of international rescue action would prove useful.

*Saints and Liars* tells the story of a number of Americans — Jews, Quakers, Unitarians — who traveled to points around the globe to offer relief and to rescue victims of Nazi Germany and other racist states.<sup>1</sup> The narrative arcs from one rescue activity hot spot to another; as one place became too dangerous and the operatives' scope dwindled, another location emerged. Zooming in on these concrete situations, *Saints and Liars* traces the development of efforts on the ground and how they unfolded in real time: the dazzling heroics and the daily grind of desperate relief and rescue operations.

These Americans were, at one and the same time, saints and liars. Martha and Waitstill Sharp and Elisabeth and Robert Dexter undertook illicit activities to achieve their goals, including clandestine rescue, illegal currency exchange, and aiding undocumented refugees. Laura Margolis bent rules and regulations without a qualm to obtain needed supplies, equipment, and funds to keep the Jewish refugee community in Shanghai afloat. And Marjorie and Ross McClelland continued to try to save targeted victims even as deportation trains rolled from France to annihilation camps in the East.

Women figured prominently in relief and rescue efforts. Philanthropy and service have long been women's work. But *this* philanthropy and *this* service offered unimagined avenues for independent action. And the women loved it. They relished the independence and freedom from social norms their overseas assignments offered. Their experiences changed them. Indeed, regardless of gender these Americans emerge as both agents on behalf of others and subjects who were shaped by what they saw, did, and endured. Their work was transformative: transformative for those they managed to help, and for them, too.

If *Saints and Liars* pays particular attention to gender, it also plumbs the role of the irrational and unpredictable: the importance of timing; luck; chance; fortuitous circumstances; human sympathies and antipathies. This is not to minimize the underlying structures of ideology, policy, and practice. Were it not for Nazi ideology, policy, and practice, the Americans would not have needed to be in Europe at all. But on the ground, and at a particular moment, luck, timing, fortuitous circumstance, and irrational factors shaped individual fates.

I began to pay attention to the slippery, less concrete or measurable — yet profoundly influential — factors of luck, chance, and timing in my (co-authored) history of refugee Jews, *Flight from the Reich*.<sup>2</sup> Over and over again, escape openings turned on these unpredictable elements. The fortuitous circumstance of rain when running for one's life across an open field, because it prevented guard dogs from picking up the fugitive's scent, impeded the sentries' view, and muffled the noise of crashing through a meadow. The timing of slipping across a frontier during the interval of the guards' rounds. The chance that, on that particular night, the schedule would have changed.

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<sup>1</sup> Debórah Dwork, *Saints and Liars: The Story of Americans Who Saved Refugees from the Nazis* (N.Y.: Norton, January 2025).

<sup>2</sup> Debórah Dwork and Robert Jan van Pelt, *Flight from the Reich: Refugee Jews, 1933-1946* (N.Y.: Norton, 2009).

*Saints and Liars* tackles the even messier role of the irrational: human relations, sympathies and antipathies, drives and desires. Our Americans were operatives of improbable courage, resourcefulness, and resilience. They were fueled by principles, to be sure. But they were fueled, too, by personal and professional ambition, eagerness to actualize their potential, a taste for adventure, and frustration with limitations. Social ties and connections counted for a lot with them. Emotions played no small role, as did visceral responses. *Saints and Liars* thus offers an entirely new lens that allows us to imagine history as a time as full and rich as our own. It suggests a new turn in historical scholarship: the role of the unpredictable and the irrational.

This perspective uncovers intriguing questions. What, for instance, are we to make of the constant quarreling that emerges from contemporary documents? Laura Margolis reported on the dysfunctional relationships among Jews in Shanghai, and her own fraught interactions with many. Burritt Hiatt of the American Friends Service Committee analyzed the tensions between the central office in Marseille and the branch offices in Toulouse and Perpignan. Unitarians Charles Joy on the one side and Elisabeth and Robert Dexter on the other quarreled so heatedly that they just about forced each other out of the Unitarian Service Committee. What do these tensions tell us about relief and rescue efforts? Are they evidence of overwhelming uncertainty, anxiety, and pressure? Or of litigious personalities? The ubiquitous discord prompts us to map the relief and rescue efforts as they unfolded. At the time, no one knew what the outcome would be, nor the best way to secure their goals. The aid and rescue workers functioned in a fog of uncertainty. They negotiated constantly changing regulations, transport possibilities, and financial arrangements; the shifting military developments; the capricious whims of multiple layers of authorities and officials. And they dealt with an endless stream of people in constant stress. Reclaiming the perplexity of the American operatives and the pressure under which they functioned – lives were at stake – offers a key to the constant quarreling that marks contemporary accounts. Certainly, the fights were the result of clashing perspectives on the problems they faced and how best to handle them. Equally certainly they were the result of competition over power and authority. Most of all, however, the wrangling was an expression of the operatives' ardent wish to provide relief and to effect rescue, and the murkiness of the path forward to do so. At the time each situation unfolded, the aid workers confronted an as yet undetermined future; its horizon was the decisions they would make. Every moment was the *now* of responsibility, the *now* of decision. Foregrounding the role of the unpredictable and the irrational infuses black-and-white narratives that present history as if logical and orderly with color, transforming a story with a predictable outcome into an open-ended tale, vivid and complex.

The operatives did not interrogate their quarreling. The question they asked themselves, repeatedly, was: whom to help? Indeed, what criteria did they consider? Writing to the Friends home office in Philadelphia, Marjorie McClelland appealed to her colleague Margaret Frawley to try to find affidavits for Adolphe Borchardt, age 66, and his wife Maria. "My interest in this case started" in a conversation with her co-workers, she explained. "We were all bemoaning the fact that it so often happens that the undesirable people get the visas, while the ones you would like to see going to America are left behind. It is a phenomenon we all are familiar with, and we deeply regret that it is true that brassy, pushing people are the ones who manage to get the affidavits and the passage money, to become our fellow citizens, while the gentle, pleasant ones who do not know how to get the affidavits and the passage money, and how to put themselves forward properly, get left behind."<sup>3</sup> A dedicated aid worker, McClelland's argument in this instance was shaped by her sympathies and antipathies, not rational criteria.

*Saints and Liars* grew out of my earlier work. In *Children With A Star*, I explored the interior and exterior daily lives of Jewish children caught in the Nazi net.<sup>4</sup> Some of these children, particularly those in transit

<sup>3</sup> AFSC Case 8207. Borchardt. Letter from Marjorie McClelland to Margaret Jones. 1 December 1941.

<sup>4</sup> Debórah Dwork, *Children With A Star* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991).

## Further Reading

About Individuals (in alphabetical order by operative)

camps in the south of France, came into contact with American aid workers. Similarly, plumbing the history of Jewish refugees from Nazi Europe in *Flight from the Reich*, I noted the often-painful decisions of the many people who dealt with them, including American operatives. The prospect of another book opened. Who were these people? What spurred them to act? How, precisely, did they do what they did? And what effect did it have on *them*? What price does an operative pay for the work s/he does?

*Saints and Liars* unearths the largely buried story of American relief workers who went to Europe to offer aid to the Nazis' victims and stayed on to rescue as many as they could when what had been a dangerous situation turned lethal. Drilling down on individual operatives in specific circumstances, *Saints and Liars* lays bare the heart-wrenching situation on the ground, the operatives' aid and rescue initiatives, and the unpredictable and irrational factors that shaped their efforts.

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Moses Beckelman has not yet claimed a biographer's attention, nor did he write his memoirs. His name pops up in books on other subjects. See, for example, Yehuda Bauer, *American Jewry and the Holocaust: The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, 1939–1945* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1981).

Sheila Isenberg, *A Hero of Our Own: The Story of Varian Fry* (New York: Random House, 2001)

Laura Margolis's life awaits a biographer. Her work claims a chapter, "Laura Margolis and JDC Efforts in Cuba and Shanghai," by Zhava Litvac Glaser in *The JDC at 100: A Century of Humanitarianism*, an edited collection by Avinoam Patt, Atina Grossman, Linda Levi, and Maud Mandel (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2019). Happily, however, Margolis gained the attention of an MA student, Julie Kerksen, and a doctoral candidate, Zhava Litvac Glaser. See: Julie L. Kerksen, "Life's Work: The Accidental Career of Laura Margolis Jarblum" (master's thesis, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2000), *Theses and Dissertations*, <https://dc.uwm.edu/etd/548>; Zhava Litvac Glaser, "Refugees and Relief: The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee and European Jews in Cuba and Shanghai, 1938-1943" (dissertation, CUNY, 2015), *CUNY Academic Works*, [https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc\\_etds/561](https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_etds/561).

For an overview of Martha and Waitstill Sharp's activities, see the documentary by their grandson Artemis Joukowsky and filmmaker Ken Burns. Artemis Joukowsky and Ken Burns, *Defying the Nazis: The Sharps' War* (Walpole, NH: Florentine Films, 2016), DVD, 90 min. See, too, Joukowsky's book by the same name: Artemis Joukowsky, *Defying the Nazis: The Sharps' War* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2016).

#### About Places of Rescue Activity (in alphabetical order by location)

Lisbon. Marion Kaplan, *Hitler's Jewish Refugees: Hope and Anxiety in Portugal* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020). Ronald Weber, *The Lisbon Route: Entry and Escape in Nazi Europe* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2011).

Lithuania. For a general discussion of Jewish refugees and aid efforts in Lithuania, see Zorach Warhaftig, *Refugee and Survivor: Rescue Efforts during the Holocaust* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1988).

The Pyrenees. Rosemary Bailey, *Love and War in the Pyrenees* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2008).

Shanghai. Marcia Reynders, *Port of Last Resort: The Diaspora Communities of Shanghai* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001). See, too, an excellent collection of documents: Irene Eber, ed., *Jewish Refugees in Shanghai: A Selection of Documents* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht Verlage, 2018).

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