

Unitarian History: World War II Footnotes

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I am a child of WWII. I grew up during the war and have vivid memories of wartime in Philadelphia and Long Beach Island. Consequently I like to read about the war. One book I read was called “The Quiet American, the secret war of Varian Fry”. Varian Fry (who was not a Unitarian) was an American who was sent to Marseille in the summer of 1940 by the newly formed American Emergency Rescue Committee with funds and instructions to find and help escape many of the century’s most famous artists and intellectuals from Nazi occupied France.

While reading this book I ran across some short passages that referred to activities by some Unitarians. I was curious and the result of this curiosity is what I will talk about today.

This is a talk about roots. Your roots and my roots. It is the story of three Unitarians who through great sacrifice and bravery laid the foundation for Unitarian Universalist service work for decades to come. In order to preserve chronology, I will be skipping back and forth between these people.

Charles Rhind Joy

1885-1978

- Born in Boston,
- Harvard graduated 1908,
- Andover Theological Divinity School graduated 1911,

- Married 1911 , 4 children
- “I majored in English literature at Harvard College and then entered Divinity School. It was my ambition, in those days, to combine theology and literature in one career.”
- Minister of the First Parish Church in Portland Maine
- Resigned from the church at the outbreak of WWI because he was a pacifist and his sermons conflicted with the views of many parishioners.
- Spent 18 months in Europe with the YMCA (six months with the French Army at the front) received a medal from the French. Saw some of the bloodiest battles.
- Transferred to Northern France as regional director of YMCA activities.
- 1919-1922 Minister in Pittsfield, Mass
- 1922-1927 Minister of the first church in Dedham, a church established in 1638. Joy spent 5 happy years there and also began to be active denominational affairs: Literary Editor of the Christian register and Secretary of the Unitarian Ministerial Union.
- 1927 Minister All Souls Church Lowell, Mass. Continued his denominational work. “ The last summer in Lowell I spent with my wife abroad, the only pleasure trip I have ever taken in Europe.The chief event of which was my climbing of the Matterhorn, a foolhardy exploit, of which I ought to be

ashamed, but of which I am inordinately proud.” Written for his 25th Harvard reunion book 1933

- 1930 Vice President of the AUA, and Ad Hoc speaker for liberal church unity.
- 1936 The Unitarian Church was in dire straits having endured significant losses during the depression. Therefore because of hard times a power struggle ensued. AUA President Cornish and by association, his VP Charles Joy were removed from office.
- Uneasy about his joblessness, started looking for a job in the secular world because he could not find a pulpit. He thought his career as a minister had ended.
- March 1938 Germany annexed Austria. Joy, who had no job, was asked by Robert Dexter, a department head for the AUA, to help him develop a Unitarian Service Committee to be patterned after the American Friends Service Committee. Dexter had observed that the AFSC’s charitable works had done more to create respect and admiration for the Quakers than any publication they ever produced. The USC founded in Boston was to assist Eastern Europeans to escape Nazi persecution.

Martha and Waitstill Sharp

- Born in 1905 and 1902 respectively Martha and Waitstill married in 1927

- Martha was a graduate of Pembroke college and was working as a social worker in Chicago but moved to Wellsley when she married. Waitstill Sharp was at Harvard.
- Waitstill had dreamed of an international career but during his third year in Law school he met Dr Eugene Shippen, minister of the second Unitarian Church in Boston, who began to involve Waitstill in Church Activities. Consequently several years later he was ordained in 1933 and was assigned a small church in Meadville, PA. and then Wellsley, MA
- Martha acted as almost a second minister, organizing most of the youth work, education activities, and women's meetings and church suppers. Waitstill, according to Martha, was incapable of small talk, even with children so Martha filled that void by happily lending an ear.
- Watching the events of the early clouds of war unfold in Spain and Italy the Sharps started an "International Relations Club and in November 1938, following the Munich Pact, the Sharps led a discussion titled "The Rape of Czechoslovakia"
- Dr Robert Dexter, Head of the department of Social Relations for the AUA with Richard Wood, of the American Friends Service Committee, went to Europe in 1938 visiting Geneva, London, and Paris and sent back a report that over 20,000 people would need immediate emigration assistance.
- The Sharps were asked to go to Czechoslovakia for the AUA and \$40,000 was raised to fund their mission.

- This decision posed an enormous dilemma since they had two children ages seven and two. They were convinced, however, that the children would be well cared for by friends from the parsonage. On Feb 4, 1939 they headed for London. From London they went to Prague on Feb 23 where their work began.
- The money they brought helped them provide food, medicine, and wool for the Unitarian congregation in Prague. The supplies were hidden in the basement of the church. The money also funded publications, group dinners for German and Austrian refugees as well as support for students fleeing secretly through Poland.
- Through Feb and half of March the Sharps interviewed over 3500 (primarily the parishioners of the Unitarian Church in Prague) endangered people, both Jews and Gentiles, in order to help them to emigrate to safety around the world. As part of the effort, Waitstill engaged in black market currency exchanges to assist many more refugees than would otherwise have been possible.
- On March 15, 1939 the Germans came to Prague. Immediately, 250,000 people in Prague were at risk. Martha and Waitstill worked feverously to help people flee the country. Using Waitstill's status as a minister to remain in Prague, the Sharps brought refugees to the attention of embassies, found scholarships and employment opportunities that would ease emigration, and secured release of refugees from prison.

- They also traveled regularly to further their cause. On one trip, Martha led 35 refugees to safety in England. As the situation grew worse, they bought food and medicine for the Unitarian congregation and worked with the Salvation Army to provide meals for refugees. In four months they helped feed 350 individuals who were fleeing the Nazis and helped 284 to escape the country.
- These activities did not go unnoticed and on April 13 their offices were broken into and their files searched. Fortunately the Sharps had destroyed most of their files on March 14, the day before the Germans arrived in Prague. On April 17 Martha arrived back at her office and found their files strewn all over the street. Their time in Prague was numbered.
- On July 25, their office, along with other foreign refugee offices, was closed by the Nazis.
- After months of perilous service, the Sharps came to the attention of the Gestapo. After Reverend Sharp left Prague briefly for meeting in Geneva, he was not allowed to return to the city. Martha continued their work on her own until she left later in 1939. She found out later that she was due to be picked up by the Gestapo the day after she left.
- The couple reunited in Cherbourg and then sailed for New York. Before they arrived in the U.S. Germany had invaded Poland. WWII had begun.
- Back in the U.S. the Sharps got together with Robert Dexter and Charles Joy and formally organized the USC

with the support of Frederick Eliot, AUA president. The USC, modeled on the American Friends Service Committee, was approved as a standing committee of the AUA in May 1940.

- Among its first official acts was ask the Sharps to return to Europe to set up an office in Paris to continue the work of helping refugees flee from Nazi oppression.
- One day before the Sharps were to sail to Europe the Germans marched into Paris.
- Undaunted, the Sharps flew to Lisbon arriving on June 20, 1940 and set up shop at the USC office where they began again the tedious and sometimes dangerous task of providing documentation and resources to refugees fleeing Nazi Germany, Vichy France, and fascist Spain
- They specialized in political activists, academics, and intellectuals who were wanted for speaking out against government oppression, or in favor of alternative parties, since other refugee organizations were sometimes reluctant to work with such cases.
- Martha focused especially on children whose families had been lost or wished to send the children overseas for safety. In one case she learned that the Germans had commandeered all supplies of fresh milk and that refugee children in southern France were suffering as a result. The Sharps arranged for the purchase of a train car load of condensed and powdered milk, which was shipped to Marseille and distributed in the city of Pau. Today there is a memorial in the town hall of Pau, commemorating that

delivery and bestowing the city's medal of honor on Martha Sharp.

- Even as she suffered the hardship of being separated from her own children, Martha's reputation grew as she helped more families to safety. She soon became known as the "Guardian Angel of European Children".
- One of their more daring exploits was to escort the internationally famous and noted anti-Nazi novelist Lion Feuchtwanger and his wife out of Vichy France, through Spain, and into Portugal where they sailed to New York.
- Lion Feuchtwanger was on a speaking engagement in the US when Hitler ascended to power. He was advised by the German Ambassador not to return to Germany. He returned to Europe in 1933 and settled with his wife, Marta, in the south of France.
- He lived in the South of France until WWII broke out and, as a noted anti Nazi on Hitler's most wanted list, was interned in a refugee camp. His wife Marta, with the help of the American Consul, engineered an escape from the camp and they fled to Marseille.
- In Marseille the Feuchtwangers were introduced to the Sharps who were there at the behest of Mrs Roosevelt. When Waitstill met the Feuchtwangers he said "I am here to help you leave France". Martha Sharp rented a room in a hotel which was attached to the train station by a tunnel. The Feuchtwangers, one evening, slipped into Martha's room and from there went through the tunnel to the train platform where Waitstill was waiting.

- They boarded the train to Cerbere, a fishing village at the foot of the Pyrenees. Knapsacks on their backs, they walked from the village through the vineyards and up the boulder strewn mountains to the Spanish customs office. Lion, who had a false passport was checked through but Marta , whose passport was in her name was concerned. The resourceful woman when reaching for her identity card brought out several packs of cigarettes and put them on the customs official desk explaining she had just learned that that duty on cigarettes was too much for her to pay and could she leave them here.
- The customs official pocketed the cigarettes and waved her through .
- In the Spanish Port- Bau the Feuchtwangers and the Sharps took a train to Barcelona. Short of money for passage to Lisbon the resourceful Waitstill knocked on the door of the American Consul and was able to get modest funds. Waitstill also gave a briefcase to Lion which had a red cross painted on it.
- At the Portuguese border they had to change trains. There was a journalist there who was calling Freuchtwangers name. An irritated Waitstill Sharp reprimanded “shut up or someone might lose his life”
- In Lisbon the party of four was met by Dr Joy who urged Freuchtwanger to leave immediately because the Nazis were abducting famous refugees. Martha gave up her seat on the plane and Lion and Waitstill flew to New York. Marta left two weeks later.

- One of Martha Sharps last acts was to smuggle 29 children and 10 adults from Marseille to New York. She sailed from Lisbon to New York herself in December 1940 with two of the children and four adults and the remaining children and adults sailed on a second ship and were met in New York by Martha on December 23, 1940.

And now back to Charles Joy

- He was asked in 1940 to replace the Sharps in Lisbon to direct all Unitarian aid in Europe.
- Thus began a career bringing aid to displaced and suffering people.
- From the USC office in Lisbon he supervised a secret network of couriers and agents who smuggled anti Nazi's and Jews from Southern France, through Spain, and into Portugal .
- One of those who joined his band was Hans Deutsch, a Czech cartoonist, a noted anti-Nazi, and a Jew. Deutsch fled Prague when the Germans took over and went to Paris. He left Paris in 1940 when the French capitulated and went into hiding in Southern France, then Spain, and eventually Portugal, on an altered passport. where he met Joy.
- Deutsch was most impressed by Joy and the USC. He later wrote to Joy.
- “ there is something that urges me to tell you... how much I admire your utter self denial and readiness to serve, to sacrifice all, your time, your health, your well being, to help, help, help.”

- “ I am not what you may call a believer. But if your kind of life is the profession of your faith—as it is, I feel sure that religion, ceasing to be magic and mysticism becomes confession to practical philosophy, and what is more, to active, really useful social work. This religion, with or without a heading, is one to which even a godless fellow like myself can say wholeheartedly, yes.”
- At the time, the USC was an unknown organization and lacked any official clout. This was a handicap in the cloak and dagger world where establishing trust quickly across barriers of language, nationality, and faith could mean life instead of death. Disguises, signs and countersigns, and midnight runs across guarded borders were the means of freedom in those days. The USC had no official standing to issue documents that the refugees could show to the French, Spanish , and Portugese authorities.
- Joy decided to hire Deutsch to come up with some sort of symbol that would look official and could be put on stationary, documents, and badges in order to impress the authorities. THE SEAL
- On Jan 31, 1941 Joy wrote to Robert Dexter, then the USC executive director in Boston, “ I happen now to have an artist working for me... Recently I asked him to work in his spare time on a symbol of our committee, which could be placed on a seal, and used in our documents. When a document may keep a man out of jail, give him standing with governments and police, it is important that it look important.” He goes on to say “ I have made it up into a seal, not because I have any idea of forcing this upon the committee, without consulting them, but because these things cost very little here, and at least it will serve as a temporary expedient for us

to use in our papers until we get something better, if the committee does not like it. Personally, I like it very much. It is simple, chaste, and distinctive. I think it might well become the sign of our work everywhere.”

- It is important to point out that this flaming chalice is not just an artistic decoration. It is a symbol that was born in a world of oppression and terror to protect the persecuted. It actually saved lives, and for that, we can be justly proud that it is our symbol.
- Charles Rhind Joy was a proud, able, selfless, stubborn man who dedicated his life to scholarship and the service of his fellow man. He wrote for his 50th Harvard reunion in 1958.
- “ My life since the happy Cambridge days in college and Divinity school seems to have fallen into three distinct periods. From 1911 to 1940 I was active in the ministry of the Unitarian Church.... From 1940 to 1954 I was engaged in International relief work. USC, Save the children Federation, chief of the Korean Mission, African Affairs for C.A.R.E. ..I found time to write, edit, or translate a dozen books, eight on Albert Schweitzer (whom he admired greatly). The third period devoted to speaking and writing.
- “I have served overseas in Europe and Korea during the three wars that have punctuated my life story, and I have found all the years to be a rather exciting pilgrimage”
- With their colleagues in Lisbon (Charles Joy) and Varian Fry in Marseille the Sharps helped to arrange safe passage out of Europe for 1,000 to 3,000 people.

One last footnote:

- There is a garden in Israel at the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial where names are inscribed upon a marble wall – for those gentiles who, at grave peril to themselves, saved the lives of Jews who would have otherwise died at the hands of the Nazis. They are called “Righteous Among Nations” There are over 21,000 names on the wall, many famous names such as Oskar Schindler, but only three American names. Varian Fry was the first and the other two are Waitstill and Martha Sharp.