

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

## DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

---

University of Nebraska Press -- Sample Books  
and Chapters

University of Nebraska Press

---

Spring 2010

### Rescue and Flight

Susan Elisabeth Subak

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/unpresssamples>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

---

Subak, Susan Elisabeth, "Rescue and Flight" (2010). *University of Nebraska Press -- Sample Books and Chapters*. 26.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/unpresssamples/26>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the University of Nebraska Press at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in University of Nebraska Press -- Sample Books and Chapters by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

# RESCUE & FLIGHT

[Buy the Book](#)

# RESCUE



*Susan Elisabeth Subak*

AFTERWORD BY WILLIAM F. SCHULZ

[Buy the Book](#)

# FLIGHT

AMERICAN RELIEF WORKERS  
WHO DEFIED THE NAZIS

*University of Nebraska Press | Lincoln and London*

[Buy the Book](#)

© 2010 by the Board of Regents of the  
University of Nebraska. All rights reserved.  
Manufactured in the United States of America ☺

The views or opinions expressed in this book  
and the context in which the images are used  
do not necessarily reflect the views or policy  
of, nor imply approval or endorsement by, the  
United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

Library of Congress Cataloging-  
in-Publication Data

Subak, Susan Elisabeth.

Rescue and flight : American relief  
workers who defied the Nazis /  
Susan Elisabeth Subak ; afterword  
by William F. Schulz.

p. cm. Includes bibliographical  
references and index.

ISBN 978-0-8032-2525-1

(hardcover : alkaline paper)

1. World War, 1939-1945—Civilian  
relief—Europe. 2. World War,  
1939-1945—Refugees—Europe.  
3. Unitarian Service Committee—History.  
4. Unitarians—Europe—History—  
20th century. 5. War relief—Europe—  
History—20th century. 6. War relief—  
United States—History—20th century.  
7. World War, 1939-1945—Religious  
aspects—Unitarians. I. Title.

D809.U5S88 2010

940.54'77873094—dc22

2009040225

Designed and set in Ehrhardt  
by Nathan Putens.

*To the rescued and the rescuers in  
my family—Carl, Ilse, Margit—  
and to Robert, Elisabeth, Lewis,  
and Harriet Dexter.*



## Contents

List of Illustrations	<i>ix</i>
Preface	<i>xi</i>
Introduction	<i>xvii</i>
1. Prague, 1939	<i>1</i>
2. Marseille and Lisbon, 1940	<i>25</i>
3. Lisbon and Marseille, 1940	<i>54</i>
4. Marseille, 1941	<i>84</i>
5. Marseille, 1942	<i>119</i>
6. Geneva, Lisbon, and Marseille, 1943	<i>153</i>
7. New York, Lisbon, Paris, and Prague, 1944–45	<i>187</i>
Conclusion	<i>217</i>
Afterword by William F. Schulz	<i>233</i>
Acknowledgments	<i>239</i>
Notes	<i>241</i>
Bibliography	<i>275</i>
Index	<i>281</i>





## Illustrations

### PHOTOGRAPHS

1. Robert Cloutman Dexter, 1931 *xvi*
2. Harriet Dexter, 1937 *xviii*
3. Elisabeth Anthony Dexter,  
ca. 1927 *xxvi*
4. Martha and Waitstill Sharp, 1939 *2*
5. Norbert Capek, ca. 1917 *12*
6. Front page, *Boston Evening  
Globe*, January 14, 1940 *27*
7. Varian Fry, 1941 *37*
8. Lion and Marta  
Feuchtwanger, 1934 *49*
9. Walter Meyerhof, 1941 *77*
10. Refugees arriving at Lisbon  
train station, 1941 *83*
11. Herta Field, Charles Joy, and  
Noel Field, 1941 *85*
12. René Zimmer *87*
13. Dispensary, Unitarian Service  
Committee *110*
14. Fanny Zimmer and Margot Stein *111*
15. Preschool class, Rivesaltes  
Internment Camp, 1942 *120*
16. Children outside Rivesaltes  
Internment Camp, 1942 *121*

17. Nurses, Unitarian Service  
Committee clinic 122
18. Patients and staff, Unitarian  
Service Committee clinic 123
19. Margot Stein, ca. 1941 124
20. Herta and Noel Field, ca. 1941 127
21. Donald Lowrie and Helga  
Holbeck, spring 1942 142
22. Ilse Subak, Karl Subak, and Harriet  
Dexter, winter 1942–43 167
23. Herta “Jo” Tempì, 1946 199
24. Clothes depot, ca. 1945 201
25. Robert Dexter, summer 1955 218

MAP

Southwest Europe, 1940–42 29

## Preface

When I was growing up, my father had regular visits from a long-haired academic from New England named Lewis Dexter. The era was the 1960s, but the way he wore his hair, his small rectangular glasses, and the woolen coats chosen from rummage sales reminded me more of an eighteenth-century scholar. He was plain spoken and given to talking a great deal about his polymath learning. He was also highly indulgent of my juvenile challenges. One of them was to pull out a long, dull book and ask him whether it was really true that he could read anything from cover to cover in under two hours. I never proved him wrong.

It was only later that I learned that his family had a large part in my father's immigrating to this country, a story I knew nothing about. My grandparents had died of tuberculosis, I thought, and for all I knew, my father had hiked over the Austrian Alps to Switzerland like the Von Trapp family in *The Sound of Music*.

By the time I was in college I knew that Lewis Dexter's parents—Robert and Elisabeth—had written the affidavit in 1938 for my Jewish father to come to the United States and that they had founded an organization—the Unitarian Service Committee—that had worked in Europe during World War II. I took a class in the history of the Holocaust and read a total of three examples of rescue—the stories of Raoul Wallenberg, Oskar Schindler, and the French village of Le Chambon—and wondered if there were more. I wrote my term paper on the American government response to the Holocaust and looked for a description of what the Unitarian Service Committee or any other private American organization had done, but did not find one. Instead, I found just a brief confirmation that the Unitarian and Quaker groups had had a presence in Europe at the time.<sup>1</sup> A story of American rescuers did not seem to exist in the literature, I concluded from my not-very-thorough exploration. It seemed that history had forgotten that there were any.

After Lewis Dexter died in 1995, an essay he had written in honor of his mother—Elisabeth Anthony Dexter—came to me.<sup>2</sup> Elisabeth

was the grand-niece of Susan B. Anthony, and Lewis was mainly interested in his mother's accomplishments as a historian of early American social history. She had published studies of women's roles in the economies of Colonial America and, even at the end of her life, she was best known for this work.<sup>3</sup> Part of Lewis's paper was a short but intriguing section on his parents' work with the Unitarian Service Committee, which led me to several thick folders at the National Archives in College Park, Maryland. These papers were stamped "Confidential" and "Secret" and sometimes showed the signature of Allen Dulles, the deputy director of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS). The espionage link was exciting but, I suspected, not as interesting as the Dexters' work with refugees, of which I still knew little.

At this time, I also began to learn about the extraordinary work of Varian Fry, the only American—by the end of the twentieth century—to have been honored with the Righteous Among the Nations award by Yad Vashem, Israel's official memorial to the victims of the Holocaust. This story was full of adventures—forged passports, paths over the Pyrenees, safe houses in France—and a list of celebrity and less famous clients that stretched beyond two thousand people.<sup>4</sup> But when I left the genre of biography and read more deeply in Varian Fry's correspondence, the Unitarian Service Committee's name was all over it. Although this chapter in American Unitarian institutional history seemed to have been largely forgotten, clues that remained suggested that the story was very rich.

My original interest in this story started in part with my fondness for Lewis Dexter. But it is because of his sister, Harriet, that the Dexters wrote the affidavit that allowed my father to come to the United States and escape a likely death. For Robert and Elisabeth Dexter, my father's affidavit was the first they ever wrote. If their daughter had not pressed them to help my father to come to the United States, the Dexters may never have had an interest in directly helping refugees, and my father would not have had the opportunity. These developments were the result of a chance meeting between Harriet Dexter and my father in 1937 at a summer camp in England. In the following year, after Hitler's annexation of Austria, Harriet appealed to her

parents to help her friend. Her brother, Lewis, who was in graduate school at the University of Chicago, where he had been an academic protégé as an undergraduate, also started exchanging letters with my father and made his own pleas to his parents.<sup>5</sup> Robert and Elisabeth said that they would consider it.

In July 1938 my father decided that he could not stay in Vienna any longer. The last straw was a sign on a park bench that said *Nicht für Juden* (“Not for Jews”). His American visa had not yet come through—indeed, he did not know if it would ever arrive—but he decided to immediately leave for one of the few places Jews could go without visas, to Riga in Latvia. He set off with a young traveling companion, who introduced him to some friends of hers, a Jewish family in Riga. Although the family was large and had only a modest living space, they made room for him. That he had found such friendly hospitality was fortunate because his stay in Riga stretched out indefinitely in those uncertain months of 1938.

After spending a few months in Riga hoping that his U.S. visa application would arrive, my father received a reassuring letter from Elisabeth Dexter sent on October 12. She wrote that she understood that his U.S. visa application was now complete, that she had sent her letters on his behalf, and that they were looking forward to seeing him in the United States one day. She went on to write about her and Robert’s idea to start a new organization. “We are very much distressed over what is happening in Czechoslovakia. It is just possible that Mr. Dexter may go next week for a short trip there, to make plans for help from the United States—such as the American Friends have been doing in Vienna.”<sup>6</sup>

During the next year, 1939, the Unitarians would convert their aspirations into an overseas program for more widespread rescue. However, for my immediate family the one and only rescue was completed in that year with my father’s arrival in the United States. In 1938 my grandparents, Ernest and Marianne Subak, also faced the decision as to whether to try to leave the country. Doing so would have meant giving up all their possessions and roots of a lifetime. They were already in their fifties. The chance that they would both receive U.S. visas was not high. Because he was born in Moravia, Ernest would

have to apply for a visa as a Czech national, which meant fitting within a much smaller quota number than that for Austrians and Germans.<sup>7</sup> Ernest had been an officer in the Austrian army during World War I. They held out some hope that their lifelong loyalty to the Austrian state would mean that they would have some rights as citizens. Marianne's uncle Theo Zerner, a prominent physician, and his wife had already decided that a future in Vienna would be impossible. They chose to take their own lives that summer.

In the course of the research for this book, I came across letters, journal accounts, and telegrams from Robert and Elisabeth Dexter about their efforts in 1941 to bring my grandparents over. Discovering this material was a painful jolt, and I did not want to explore it very deeply. I believe that by the time my grandparents had moved high up the waiting list for a U.S. visa, new U.S. State Department rules in 1941 destroyed their chances. This informal rule, called the "Relatives Clause," barred U.S. visas to applicants who had close relatives who would be remaining in German-controlled regions.

March 6, 1941: This latest cable was a thunderclap of bad news for them because they have been working every way to get their parents here and now it looks impossible. I wish that I could understand the cable but no one seems to know just where the Chase Bank fits into the picture.<sup>8</sup>

April 24, 1941: DEXTER HERE CABLE 1200 DOLLARS SUBAKS GLASER TICKETS<sup>9</sup>

May 11, 1941: In addition I have finally gotten most of the money sent (although the Subak's money, which I wanted most of all, is still held up).<sup>10</sup>

June 1, 1941: There is still great difficulty in getting passages. Nothing for the Strausses [Subaks] yet. If they were here I could get them space at the last moment, but they cannot get a visa until their passage is reserved, and so far I've been unable to wangle one in advance.<sup>11</sup>

July 1, 1941: SUBAK TRANSPORTATION ARRANGED BUT VISA REFUSED PRESUMABLY ACCOUNT RELATIVES AWAITING DETAILS PUNKT.<sup>12</sup>

After my grandparents' deaths in 1942, my father and Robert and Elisabeth Dexter did not see each other for many years. The weight of a sense of guilt sat heavily on all of them for a long time and was never entirely lifted.

Among the lists of refugees and the correspondence, I was surprised to come across records that showed that the Unitarians had tried to help at least two other families that were related to me. These families were not in touch with each other or with my father and grandparents at that time and each would have encountered the Unitarian staff on their own. Gerda Subak and her children, John and Frank, were refugees from Prague and met the Unitarian staff in Lisbon and probably in Agde, France, where Martha and Waitstill Sharp were helping the families of Czech soldiers. Gerda and her family were able to leave for New York after a few months' wait in Portugal. Another relative, Erwin Subak, from southern Czechoslovakia, had help with his visa application to the United States, which was filed as a Unitarian case at the U.S. State Department but with no further information.<sup>13</sup> He died in 1941 in Slovakia, but his wife and daughter survived him. That all these people relied on the Unitarians in some way struck me at first as a remarkable coincidence, but eventually it drove home how small the world of rescue really was.





1. Robert Cloutman Dexter, 1931. Courtesy of the author.

## Introduction

In August of 1937 Robert and Elisabeth Dexter and their daughter, Harriet, traveled to England on a trip that began as a family vacation. Robert Dexter was an officer of the American Unitarian Association and was heading to Oxford for a meeting of liberal Christian congregations and then to Prague. The Dexters had traveled to similar meetings in previous summers and enjoyed them a great deal, beginning with the impressive meals served on the trans-Atlantic crossings.

The American Unitarians maintained direct ties with their fellow congregants at the British Unitarian Association, and both the American and British Unitarian associations now shared more than a century of history and friendly exchanges but also a similar problem of declining numbers. Unitarian membership had fallen sharply in Great Britain during World War I and stood at no more than about twenty-five thousand members.<sup>1</sup> In the United States, Unitarian congregations and membership had declined during the Depression years.<sup>2</sup> Although influential in New England, the Unitarian Church numbered fewer than sixty thousand members in the United States at that time.<sup>3</sup>

In both countries Unitarian leaders sought ways to make the denomination's generally optimistic perspective appear more relevant to its times. American Unitarian ties with congregants in other countries tended to be with those who practiced a liberal form of Christianity that was pluralistic and broad ranging in its interests. That had been the case with their relations with Christians in Germany, but the American Unitarian Association had severed ties after Hitler's putsch in 1933.<sup>4</sup>

Before they left for Czechoslovakia for meetings with liberal religious leaders in that country, Robert and Elisabeth dropped off Harriet at an English holiday camp in the countryside northeast of London. Harriet was nineteen years old and had finished her freshman year at Oberlin College in Ohio.<sup>5</sup> After a number of days spent around the swimming pool at the camp, Harriet met a young man there who shared her interest in exploring some of the surrounding East Anglian countryside. He was a slender, fair-haired eighteen-year-old from Vienna named Hans



2. Harriet Dexter, Camp Kessingland, England, 1937. Courtesy of the author.

Subak. Ordinarily, a holiday camp in the flatlands of southern England would not have been his idea of a great vacation. However, his parents were aware of the disturbing developments in Germany and had the idea that this would be a good time for their Jewish son to improve on his English.

Over the next weeks, a friendship developed between Harriet and Hans. A photograph from that summer shows Harriet standing in front of one of the camp outbuildings. She is wearing a simple sweater over a solid knitted skirt and has dispensed with any jewelry. She has a large forehead like her father's but her eyes are merry. The effect is wide-open and friendly, and she is looking very happy.

When the month was over, Harriet returned to college and Hans to Vienna. During that autumn and winter of 1937, Harriet and Hans kept in touch. In March of 1938 Hans and his family's worst fears came true when Hitler completed the German annexation of Austria, with the overwhelming approval of most Austrians. For Hans, circumstances were not immediately desperate. The director of his program allowed him to continue his studies and even his stamp club ignored instructions to immediately expel all Jewish members. By April, however, he clearly saw the need to emigrate, and he wrote to the only American he knew—Harriet Dexter. Harriet immediately contacted her parents and pressed them to help her friend. Hans had sent in an application for a U.S. visa, but he needed an American sponsor who would attest to his “morals” and make assurances that as a refugee he would not be an economic burden on the American public. In her unpublished memoirs, Elisabeth Dexter wrote of this moment, of her and Robert's initial hesitation and their decision to at least meet the young man during their upcoming trip to Vienna and Prague. “Our children urged us to sign an affidavit for him, but we elders, who did not know Karl [Hans], hesitated about assuming such a responsibility. As we were going to Europe that summer, however, we made an opportunity to see him and his family.”<sup>6</sup>

The Dexters were aware of the actions being taken against the Jews in regions controlled by Germany, but helping individual refugees had never been the mandate of the American Unitarian Association. During their 1937 visit with liberal church leaders in Czechoslovakia, the

Dexters had heard a great deal about the anti-Semitic developments in Germany. Germany had already passed its “racial purity” laws known as the Nuremberg Laws, which forbade Jews from marrying Germans and denied Jews the basic rights of citizenry.<sup>7</sup> The end of 1937 saw a sharp turn in anti-Jewish policy in Germany as the Nazi state began to attack all aspects of Jewish economic life, beginning with boycotts, then dismissal of Jewish civil servants and professionals and expropriation of Jewish-owned businesses.<sup>8</sup> Many German and Austrian Jewish refugees were now living in Czechoslovakia.

In fact the Dexters did visit Hans Subak during that summer of 1938 and met his parents, Ernest and Marianne Subak. During the day, they made their visits, and for two evenings they stayed with the Subak family and discussed plans for Hans’s efforts to emigrate. The Dexters spoke only basic German but the two families were able to communicate with each other in French.<sup>9</sup> Elisabeth found in Marianne Subak a like-minded person with two grown children and a lifetime of serious reading habits. Both Dexters seemed to like the young man that their daughter had met the summer before and recalled in their memoir, “We were so pleased with them all that our hesitations vanished.”<sup>10</sup>

Staying with the Subaks, the Dexters could not help but learn more about the extreme distress being faced by Austrian Jews at that time. Robert Dexter sent this description home to the American Unitarians:

The lot of the Jew in Austria today is far worse than it ever was, or is at present, in Germany. Many go daily to Dachauer [*sic*], the worst of the concentration camps, their families knowing that in all probability their next word will be a brief form letter—“Please come get the ashes.” They will never know what happened. . . . Anyone whom the “*Regierung*” does not like, who cannot prove beyond dispute that he has no Jewish blood . . . must all go as there is not work for them, they can carry on no business, and even if they have funds enough to live on after September first, none but Jews can work for them.<sup>11</sup>

Robert’s reports also covered the frustration of Jewish applicants who were unlikely to fit into the U.S. quota, which the Unitarians already viewed to be overly rigid: “Sixty-five thousand from Vienna alone had applied for admission to the United States, and the total annual quota

for all Germany—including Austria—is twenty-seven thousand. These poor people can take no money out—no matter how much they may possess—ten to twenty marks is the limit. Consequently each immigrant must be guaranteed by an American. This is the problem the Friends are trying to solve and one in which I hope we may be able to help.”<sup>12</sup>

After their visit with Hans and his family during the summer of 1938, the Dexters continued on to Budapest and to Prague. In Czechoslovakia, Robert traveled to the area near the Sudeten German territory and observed Czech military preparations. In his report to headquarters he wrote, “There is no bitterness against the German people . . . but a deep hatred of Nazi philosophy and a fear of what Germany will do. [People] fervently hope that the other democracies will act before it is too late.”<sup>13</sup> In Prague, Robert and Elisabeth met Norbert Capek, the head of the Czech Unitarian church and renewed their ties to some of the other Unitarian and liberal Christian ministers in the country.

Robert now held the title of director for foreign relations, and he was feeling increasingly confident that he could enlarge upon his role as ambassador for American Unitarians and risk starting a new program. However, the international program that Robert Dexter represented was of a modest scale that had had the resources to do little more than attend liberal religious congresses and to maintain ties with Unitarian associations in Europe. Until this point, the American Unitarian Association had not considered any direct aid program overseas.

Back in Boston in early October 1938, Robert Dexter spoke before the American Unitarian Association’s board of directors about his observations, focusing his presentation on the desperate situation of refugees in the Sudetenland and in the rest of Czechoslovakia.<sup>14</sup> He took this opportunity to make a plea to start the new organization that had been taking shape in his mind since his recent travels. An eyewitness recalled years later: “His appeal was intensely moving and persuasive. It was accepted without dissent and with enthusiasm.”<sup>15</sup>

What Robert Dexter was arguing for was a new and large commitment to help refugees in Czechoslovakia.<sup>16</sup> He was proposing that the Unitarians should gain experience in this work by proceeding with the Quaker organization, the American Friends Service Committee. The Quakers had had a presence in Europe since World War I when

the committee was set up to provide young conscientious objectors with noncombatant roles with the Allies' war effort.<sup>17</sup>

Next, Robert Dexter organized a meeting with the Quakers in Philadelphia. In his letter to them he explained his motivation: "The most important thing on my conscience at the moment is to see what there is if anything that we can do in cooperating with you . . . to help in the placement of the refugees from Austria and Germany." Incidentally, Robert Yarnall, of the American Friends Service Committee, the recipient of Dexter's letter, was already familiar with Hans Subak's case, and Robert brought him up to date: "We got the documents off yesterday at the first possible opportunity for Hans Subak and I hope that everything will be all right at that end. I shall not feel certain until I see him on the dock."<sup>18</sup>

Robert Dexter spent the next few weeks trying to rally some of the most prominent Unitarian leaders. He wrote a long letter to Louis Cornish, former president of the American Unitarian Association, saying that he felt that the Unitarians had a special responsibility for the Czechs: "We, more than any other American religious group, have kept close contacts with the Czechs and also in view of the advantage which we would have there because Mrs. Masaryk was a Unitarian."<sup>19</sup> He was referring to Charlotte Garrigue Masaryk, who was the wife of the former Czech president and a Unitarian from New York.

Dexter volunteered to return to Czechoslovakia once more, this time traveling with Richard Wood of the American Friends Service Committee, or Quakers. Through his ties with a new organization to help Czech refugees, headed by Nicholas Murray Butler, the president of Columbia University, Robert Dexter had raised over twenty-nine thousand dollars to spend in Czechoslovakia on the joint Unitarian and Quaker mission.<sup>20</sup>

By October 1938 Robert Dexter had passed a decision through the board of directors to work with the Friends to send personnel and relief to Czechoslovakia. In November, he and Richard Wood toured the abysmal camps for refugees kicked out of the Sudetenland, many of whom were Jewish. He wrote to his home office that assistance from the West might help ward off the country's "dangerous tendencies towards anti-Semitism and nationalism."<sup>21</sup>

When Robert Dexter returned from Prague in December 1938, he wrote detailed recommendations on a program that he hoped would help the “non-Aryan Christians” in Czechoslovakia. He and his colleagues believed that they should start by finding a couple who would work in the country for at least half a year. Dexter helped push through a telegram to U.S. secretary of state Cordell Hull urging changes to the American immigration laws in order to admit increased numbers of German Jews:

I SUGGEST THAT YOU RECOMMEND TO NEXT SESSION OF CONGRESS NECESSARY LEGISLATION FOR QUOTA CHANGES OR REVISIONS OF IMMIGRATION LAWS ADMIT INCREASED NUMBER GERMAN JEWS AND THEREBY RELIEVE PRESENT SITUATION IN GERMANY RESULTING IN INJUSTICE, PERSECUTION, AND TERROR FOR JEWISH PEOPLE.<sup>22</sup>

The policies that Robert Dexter and the American Unitarian Association were now advocating were very different from Robert Dexter’s views during the 1920s when he wrote a college textbook, *Social Adjustment*, which defended the quota system and the restrictions of the 1924 U.S. immigration law.<sup>23</sup> Whereas his earlier views seemed to reflect worries that some immigrants do not assimilate well enough, he was now focusing on the skills and contributions that this well-educated group of Europeans could bring to the American economy and culture. Over the next years, he became a strong advocate for the economic and cultural value of these new refugees.

For support for his ideas, Robert Dexter did not have to go farther than his own congregation at the Unitarian Church in Belmont, located west of Boston. The minister there was a famous hymnologist named Henry Wilder Foote whose heart was very much with the Jewish victims of Nazism. During that autumn of 1938, after the widespread destruction of Jewish property in Germany on Kristallnacht, Foote wrote a long article entitled “The Deadly Infection of Anti-Semitism.”

There is no prospect of any relief from the reign of terror for the Jews in Germany, and in all neighboring lands which the Nazis can intimidate. The avowed intention is to drive out all Jews who can be made to pay for their escape by the sacrifice of their property and



to exterminate those who cannot get away. Coming centuries will record this anti-Semitic campaign on one of the blackest and most discreditable pages of history. . . . In a small and barren country [Palestine], no larger in size and with smaller resources than the state of Vermont, it produced the greatest body of religious literature in the world. Its legislation was humane and enlightened far beyond that of its neighbors.<sup>24</sup>

Wilder Foote's writings were based on newspaper accounts and, most likely, the firsthand impressions of his congregant Robert Dexter. His congregation was an important catalyst for the Unitarians' new refugee program, and two of its members became board members of what would be the Unitarian Service Committee. Edward Witte, who became treasurer, was a businessman with a strong interest in international affairs.<sup>25</sup> Seth Gano, who became vice chairman, worked in finance and was an art collector and philanthropist. Over the next years, Gano spent a great deal of time trying to bridge differences between the Boston and European staff, and through his elegant letters, smoothing increasingly ruffled feathers.

The engaged sympathy of the Belmont congregation was unusual for a time in which isolationism and some degree of anti-Semitism were the norm. However, it is the small group of American Christians overseas—the Unitarian Service Committee senior staff and their collaborators, Varian Fry and Donald Lowrie—who risked their lives over many months living in hardship in Europe and who embodied rescue and flight. These people were among the first to meet new waves of refugees flowing through France and Portugal, and among the last to leave. These leaders of the Unitarian Service Committee included Robert and Elisabeth Dexter, Charles Joy, Martha and Waitstill Sharp, and Noel Field.

Among the Unitarians, it is hard to imagine that a major rescue effort would have been initiated during World War II were it not for Robert Dexter's dream for a rescue organization and his confidence in pushing the idea forward. A hardy traveler, he had been a diplomat for American Unitarians during the 1930s, possessing a friendly handshake and unaffected compassion for others. His hardy, roughhewn appearance was compared with "Wild Bill" Hickock, which belied the fact

that he had had a successful career as a sociology professor at Skidmore College during the 1920s. He was critical in his outlook toward others, and was ultimately disappointed in almost everyone other than his wife, but he tended to make a good impression, and most people who encountered him during this period, including his rivals, accepted his leadership as a given and a blessing.

Elisabeth Anthony Williams Dexter was proud of her long and distinguished American ancestry, which included Roger Williams and some of Rhode Island's most prominent families. She was dedicated to continuing her family heritage of religious and racial tolerance and taught for a time at Storer College, the historic "Negro" college in Harper's Ferry, West Virginia, endowed by her grandfather. During the 1920s she earned a PhD in history, raised two small children, and worked as a professor at Skidmore College, along with her husband. By 1940 she was maintaining a large house in Belmont, Massachusetts, with an overgrown tennis court. Her career had languished, and she was thrilled to work with the Unitarian Service Committee.

Like the Dexters, Charles Joy was over fifty years old by 1940, and his position on the leadership staff for American Unitarian congregations was a second career.<sup>26</sup> A Harvard-trained theologian, Joy had come to the American Unitarian Association after serving for many years as a minister in various New England parishes. Joy seemed to lack any real hobbies, as did the Dexters, but when it came to his job he knew how to pace his tremendous reserves of energy and how to turn projects into institutions. After Varian Fry left France in 1941, Joy became the U.S. consulate's top annoyance in France for his effective work on behalf of refugees. His paper trail—the Charles Rhind Joy archive of correspondence and essays—runs to thousands of pages and is a boon to the researcher.

Unlike the other staff of the Unitarian Service Committee, Noel Field was a Quaker and socially experimental. For a time, he and his wife, Herta, tried out naturism and free love, but it is his long imprisonment behind the Iron Curtain, along with Herta, for which he is most remembered.<sup>27</sup> Their kidnapping and detention was related to their work with the Unitarian Service Committee in France and Switzerland during World War II. In this story, however, years before the



3. Elisabeth Anthony Dexter, ca. 1927. Bachrach Studios, Unitarian Universalist Service Committee Collection, bms 16076, Box 11, Andover-Harvard Theological Library, Harvard Divinity School, Harvard University.

Fields' Cold War ordeal, they are widely admired in southern France for their work and self-sacrificing habits.

In early adulthood, Martha Sharp looked like she was beginning a long life as the wife of Rev. Waitstill Sharp, spending her time planning pancake breakfasts and Christmas pageants. The woman who burst on the scene in Prague in 1939 and in southern France in 1940, however, was a star in the making. It was probably not necessary for an American to have been charming and beautiful to help refugees. It was just necessary to have been brave and persevering, but Martha was all of these. Although confident and intelligent, Reverend Waitstill fell mainly into the role of supporting the initiatives of his wife and her collaborators.

With the exception of Noel Field, most of these representatives of the Unitarian Service Committee had as young adults chosen the Unitarian denomination. The Sharps and Dexters had left their liberal Baptist upbringing to join a Unitarian congregation.<sup>28</sup> And if they were not exactly "born again," they all had well-developed interests in promoting social and religious tolerance and in the type of social engagement practiced by their personal models, among them Jane Addams, Roger Williams, and Albert Schweitzer. The staff members of the Unitarian Service Committee were all people who viewed a strong work ethic as central to character.

If the American response to the Holocaust reflects a colossal failure of mainstream attitudes and institutions, the story related here does not take exception to this point of view. Instead, the story of the U.S. government's treatment of these organizations and individuals reveals another layer of failure. In the immediate years after the war, the machinations of Cold War paranoia had the effect of eroding the reputations of this small group of rescuers.

But for the Unitarians, the relationship with their government was complex. In the late 1930s Unitarian leadership expressed their disagreement with U.S. immigration policy and lobbied the State Department for a less restrictive policy on visas and civilian shipping. However, after the United States entered the war, the Unitarian Service Committee began to influence some of the U.S. intelligence projects in southern France and the Iberian Peninsula.

Beginning in 1942, several in the group worked as informants and advisors for the Office of Strategic Services. Many of the Unitarians were willing to spy for the United States, but in return they expected that their refugee clients would benefit in some way, through communication links and funds for maintenance and health care. In turn, Allen Dulles's ties with the Unitarians stretched his conservative reputation, for through them he came to collaborate with leftists with whom he had no prior introduction or interest. When the Roosevelt administration reluctantly took on a rescue mission late in the war, Robert Dexter's role was formalized in 1944 with his appointment as representative of the War Refugee Board in Portugal.

Other enclaves of dedication emerged among the small population of Americans living overseas. Following France's surrender in 1940, many Americans still in the country boarded the boats waiting at Bordeaux. Others lay low for the entire war and some of these people found their way to the Unitarian Service Committee, depleted financially and otherwise, following Germany's surrender. However, the Americans in this story did neither. The remarkable group included the Unitarians, the World YMCA, the Americans who worked for the Jewish organizations in France and Portugal, and the Centre Americain de Secours, known as the [Varian] Fry Committee. Varian Fry had among his staff four American expatriates who had lived a very different life in France before the transformative experience of meeting Fry in 1940.

Varian Fry, the Unitarians' most important collaborator, was a Harvard-educated journalist who took a leave of absence from foreign policy reporting to start a rescue organization in Marseille, France, during the summer of 1940. Over the next year, Fry was able to help at least two thousand notable intellectuals, artists, and less distinguished people to leave Vichy France and emigrate to other countries. Apart from his own staff, the Unitarians were Fry's only American friends in Europe. After he returned from Europe in 1941, he spent the remaining war years screaming—through his writing—at a mainly uninterested American public about the unfolding Holocaust.

The original Varian Fry story, available through biographies and his own memoir, centered on the year that Fry spent in Marseille beginning in the summer of 1940 and then fading out with Fry's frustrated

attempts to continue to steer the Marseille operation from his base in New York after the Vichy police pushed him out of France in 1941. In the longer story, related in this book, the organization that Fry left behind in Marseille turned into a clandestine network for hiding and supporting refugees and for resistance and espionage. Robert Dexter started the link by recruiting Fry's staff in the summer of 1942, and the network continued until the liberation of France in 1944. The network was sustained partly with funds from the Unitarians and the OSS after it had lost contact with Varian Fry. By 1944 Fry himself was no longer completely out of the picture. The Unitarians brought him back to work as a behind-the-scenes advisor to the U.S. government's late-breaking rescue program—the War Refugee Board.

Donald Lowrie of the World YMCA was a Russian specialist from Ohio who had divided his adult life between Czechoslovakia and France. At home in France and possessing an unflappable demeanor, he came to coordinate the entire private relief enterprise in the French unoccupied zone between 1940 and 1942.<sup>29</sup> His story is also closely tied to the Unitarians, especially at the start.

The Unitarians' American staff overseas and their chief American collaborators in Europe numbered some sixteen individuals, not counting the American Quakers who worked on compatible but different projects than the Unitarians.<sup>30</sup> Most of these sixteen individuals tried to stay in France and Portugal as long as they could, but when they returned to the United States most spent the remaining war years raising money and awareness about the refugees.

This book is devoted to describing the work of this exceptional group of Unitarians and the rescue networks they supported in Europe. The story starts in Czechoslovakia, moves to southern France and Portugal, and continues in Switzerland. It does not describe in any detail the deportations from southern France, although for the majority of the foreign refugees trapped in the country, that was their fate. Although rescue was only attempted for a minority of cases, the efforts and accomplishments of these Americans is the focus of this book. Together, they were able to help several thousand refugees to escape.