



Villa Air-Bel: World War II, Escape, and a House in Marseille

Rosemary Sullivan

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France, 1940. The once glittering boulevards of Paris teem with spies, collaborators, and the Gestapo now that France has fallen to Hitler's Wermacht. For André Breton, Max Ernst, Victor Serge, Marc Chagall, Consuelo de Saint-Exupéry, Remedios Varo, Benjamin Péret, and scores of other cultural elite denounced as enemies of the Third Reich, fear and uncertainty define daily life. One wrong glance, one misplaced confidence, could mean arrest, deportation, and death. Their only salvation is the Villa Air-Bel, a château outside Marseille where a group of young people will go to extraordinary lengths to keep them alive.

Financed by the Emergency Rescue Committee, a private American relief organization, unlikely heroes—feisty graduate student Miriam Davenport, Harvard-educated classical scholar Varian Fry, beautiful and compelling heiress Mary Jayne Gold, and brilliant young Socialist and survivor of the Battle of Dunkerque Danny Bénédite and his British wife, Theo—cajole, outwit, and use every means possible to stave off the Nazis and newly installed Vichy government officials circling closer with each passing day. The château was a vibrant artistic salon, home to lively debates and clandestine affairs, to Sunday art auctions and subversive surrealist games. Relationships within the house were tense and arguments were common, but the will to survive kept the covert operation under wraps. Beyond the château's luscious façade war raged, yet hope reverberated within its halls. With the aid of their young rescuers, this diverse intelligentsia—intense, brilliant, and utterly terrified—was able to survive one of the darkest chapters of the twentieth century.

Villa Air-Bel is a powerfully told, meticulously researched true story. Rosemary Sullivan explores the diaries, memoirs, and letters of the individuals involved while uncovering their private worlds and the web of relationships they developed. Filled with suspense, drama, and intrigue, *Villa Air-Bel* is an excellent work of narrative nonfiction that delves into a fascinating albeit hidden saga in our recent history.

Villa Air-Bel: World War II, Escape, and a House in Marseille Details

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From Reader Review Villa Air-Bel: World War II, Escape, and a House in Marseille for online ebook

Jan C says

Wonderful follow-up for me to Americans in Paris: Life and Death under Nazi Occupation 1940-1944. This book follows Varian Fry and his year and a half spent in Marseilles helping to evacuate refugees. It looks like I started this book 8 years ago. That makes it look as though I wasn't very interested in it. Au contraire. I was interested and I enjoyed reading it very much. It just got lost in the forest of books.

Both books talked of people being picked up by the "milice" so when the second book talked about it I knew exactly where they were taken and why they never came back out.

This was just excellent. And we see how easy it was for the people working with Fry to be betrayed. All that has to happen is they trust the wrong person and they get set up for the French police to pick them up, not quite as bad as the Gestapo but almost.

Eileen says

Interesting. Another story about the atrocities, but not as graphic, during the Nazi regime...

Melanie says

Impeccably well researched, and engaging like a novel while sticking to the facts as they were. Awesome book.

Allyson says

This was a chilling read and I was reminded of the movie "Casablanca" throughout the reading simply with the constant mention of transit and exit visas.

I did not find the use of feelings and dialogue annoying or distracting as I usually do in biographies as the subject matter was so compelling and engrossing. What a horrific time to live through and I marvel at the ability of those who helped others putting their lives at great risk and many times losing them. I am thankful books such as these continue to be written and it only is a shame more could not have emerged before the many subjects died.

I suspect that many simply wanted to forget all they had been through and not relive it for an author through the retelling. Which is so very unfortunate for the world.

Ari says

Why I decided to read this book:

I decided to read this book because World War II interests me as well as art also I needed to read a book for a book that teaches me about another time in history.

Which category on the bingo board does this book complete:

A book that teaches you about another time in history.

What I liked about this book and why:

I liked how it gives you a really well described view on what happened during WWII from many different perspectives, also I learnt sides of history that I previously didn't know about. It shows the hardships people had to go through to get past the horrible times especially for artist and intellects from germs gt at got banished from their own country, with many of their works burnt and destroyed. You really get to know how the people in the book as if you knew them personally and knew how they did act.

What I didn't like about this book:

This is a really well written and interesting book, the only thing I can fault is that I got overwhelmed with facts and got bored with the book at times.

Who would I recommend this book to and why:

I would recommend this book to anyone who has an interest in classical artist world war II history and gives you views of many political stances, this book would be best suited for age 14+ and only people have true interest in those topics

Roberta says

Well researched and written history that reads like an adventure, although it is so packed with facts and stories that it is a slow read.

The story of the rescue of refugees from Vichy France is new to me. Now I need to know more. Varian Fry was an American dedicated to saving as many of the threatened artists, writers, intelligentsia and other refugees as he could. Totally focussed on his goal, he inspired a wide and changing team of allies and assistants to dedicate themselves to his vision. The description of the various inhabitants at the Villa Air Bel, especially the surrealists and the anarchists, was particularly compelling.

What always amazes me is how brave people can be in times of great personal danger.

Clare Sullivan says

An interesting account of how a number of intellectuals and artists from across Europe were able to leave Vichy France and the efforts, countless frustrations and bravery that many people endured.

Erik Graff says

This is a history of the Emergency Rescue Committee, its Centre Americain de Secours operations in Vichy France and of the many who worked there and the thousands they rescued during World War II. Originally assigned to facilitate the escape from European fascism of prominent intellectuals and artists, promoted by Eleanor Roosevelt, but stymied repeatedly by the U.S. State Department, the CAS, founded and organized by Varian Fry, went on to help others as well, among them refugees from the Stalin purges and Jews.

Beautifully and engagingly written, abundantly name dropping, this is a hard book to put down.

Carrie R says

There are so many stories that have come out of the atrocities and trials of World War II- most of them we will never hear about or read about it. This book is the story of one American's attempt (successful most of the time) to save some of the great artists and intellects who were trapped in German-occupied France & considered enemies of the Nazi regime.

Johan says

It is a great read and an important reminder how crucial it is to continue to help refugees and not hide behind excuses not to do so. Unfortunately one cannot in this day and age read this book and draw parallels with what is happening now at our European borders, although I doubt this was the intention of the writer when she wrote the book almost 10 years ago, when the international situation was altogether different. A reminder too about the cowardly collaboration of so many French citizens and officials during the second word war.

Stephen Bywater says

Gripping and well researched. Fascinating read.

Sharon says

This book was loaned to me by my father-in-law who is a huge WWII buff. I keep swearing off the genre, and then run across something fascinating like this one. I haven't actually read very much about relief efforts in Vichy France, so this book contained a lot of information that was new to me. The author did in-depth research and was able to provide a really complete picture of the many players in this drama. I found the philosophical underpinnings of the war to be very well explained. It was a relatively fast read for a non-fiction book.

Ann says

An incredible story! An American refugee organization in Marseilles tries for years to get Jewish, communist and other Nazi-targeted refugees out of the country. Varian Fry is at the center of a coterie of artists, intellectuals and adventurers who congregate at the Villa Air-Bel while waiting for visas, exit permits and money orders to arrive. Tales of everyday heroism, of incredible humanity and pluck, and of the slow erosion of French culture under the Vichy regime. A very poignant read.

Chris says

I really found this book fascinating. This is the story about Varian Fry and his operations in Marseille during the era of the Vichy regime. The book does a great job at describing the setting, and the story had me sitting on the edge of my chair.

Angel Serrano says

En la Francia ocupada de la II Guerra Mundial, un joven americano luchará por facilitar la huida de los intelectuales alemanes, judíos y europeos en general en peligro de ser deportados al régimen nazi. Escrito como un documental, el libro es un alegato por la libertad.
