

[smithsonianmag.com](https://www.smithsonianmag.com)

The American Heiress Who Risked Everything to Resist the Nazis

Katya Cengel

13–16 minutes



Muriel Gardiner in 1934, the year she began her career in the Austrian Resistance. Courtesy Connie Harvey / Freud Museum London

A terrified bald man stood in front of a Viennese apartment building on a cold evening. It was March 1938, and Nazi Germany had just annexed Austria. An unassuming woman opened the front door.

“Mary,” the man whispered. It functioned almost as a password.

His name was Manfred Ackermann. A socialist leader as well as a Jew, Ackermann was in danger. He hoped he would be safe with Mary, 36, who had a reputation in the Austrian Resistance for helping its members evade Nazis.

Inside her apartment, Ackermann and Mary spoke in whispers. Ackermann needed a fake passport and a hiding place until he could escape Austria. Mary assured him she could take care of both. He handed her his photograph, and she took him outside and led him to a different apartment building to hide.

The next morning Mary bought a corset to conceal the papers she planned to have made for Ackermann. She rode a train across the border to Czechoslovakia, where a contact made Ackermann a passport. Back in Vienna the next day, Mary took her usual precaution of disembarking in the city’s outskirts and then riding in a series of trams and taxis to avoid being followed, then made her way to Ackermann and secured his safe passage to Venice.

“Mary” was a pseudonym—her real name was Muriel Gardiner, an American heiress in Austria studying psychiatry. But as fascism ramped up in Europe, Gardiner assumed a heroic role, helping hundreds of Jews and Resistance members escape pre-World War II Austria. The [recent reissue](#) of her memoir, *Code Name “Mary,”* first published in 1983 by Yale University Press, is giving readers fresh access to a story that has been largely forgotten since the 1977 Oscar-winning film *Julia*, drawn from a [book](#) chapter by Lillian Hellman widely considered to have been based on Gardiner’s life. Indeed, Gardiner’s memoir offers a tale even more audacious than the movie.

Between 1934 and 1939, when she left for the United States on the last American ship to leave France after the start of World War II, Gardiner arranged clandestine meetings, smuggled goods and passports across borders, and hid Resistance members in her home. Gardiner also became a notable figure in the new field of psychiatry, a profession that welcomed few women at the time, and even after World War II she remained a pioneer in refugee resettlement, advancing ideas and actions still practiced today—work for which her granddaughter Joan Harvey says Gardiner has received little credit.

This drive for justice is impressive, especially given the origins of her family's wealth. Her paternal grandfather, Nelson Morris, was the founder of one of the first and largest meat-processing firms in Chicago, Morris & Company. Her maternal grandfather, Gustavus Swift, was the founder of the meatpacking firm Swift & Company; the excruciating experience of many Swift workers would help inspire Upton Sinclair's 1906 novel *The Jungle*, which exposed the working conditions imposed by the era's barons.

When she was 11, Gardiner's father died, and Gardiner inherited \$3 million—roughly \$90 million today. Even in her teens, she devoted herself to philanthropy. As a student at Wellesley College in 1921, Gardiner chaired a committee that funded individuals and schools in post-World War I Europe who sent “touching, often heartbreaking, appeals,” she writes in the memoir. Gardiner replied personally to an impoverished mother of three, sending a note and money. Twenty-five years later, the same woman would write to Gardiner again, this time saying she couldn't feed her grandchildren. Gardiner, then 45 and living in New Jersey, sent food packages.



A cottage in the Vienna Woods where Gardiner sometimes offered refuge to fugitives Courtesy Connie Harvey / Freud Museum London

Toward the end of her literature studies at Oxford, in 1925, Gardiner married an American doctor named Harold Abramson.

The marriage quickly soured. Abramson blamed Gardiner, saying she belonged in a sanitarium, and wrote to Sigmund Freud seeking an appointment for her. The great analyst responded that he was not taking new patients. But Gardiner was interested in psychoanalysis for her own reasons—she thought studying it would help in her planned career as a teacher—and moved to Austria in 1926, hoping Freud would find room for her among his patients. He didn't. Still, the analyst she ended up with, Ruth Mack Brunswick, secured an invitation to tea at Freud's home, where Gardiner got to know the Freuds in a less formal setting. Gardiner wasn't close with Freud himself but became good friends with his daughter Anna.

Toward the end of her analysis, Gardiner married Julian Gardiner, a British musician. They had a daughter, Connie, in 1931 and divorced soon after. The next year, Gardiner went on to study psychotherapy at the University of Vienna medical school, at a time when the practice was still new. Gardiner's course of study, as well as her age—30—and status as a single mother, marked her as a pioneer.

In 1934, the fascists took power in Vienna. Watching a funeral procession that February for those who'd died fighting the fascists, Gardiner first felt a sense of hopelessness. "As I stood in the Rathausplatz," she writes, "pity and despair overwhelmed me." Yet she was moved to action: "They could not cancel out the feelings that had been building up within me these past few days: indignation, anger and an imperative need to continue the struggle, hopeless though it might be."

Soon, she had her friends sending strangers in need to her apartment. Some visitors asked for money and help distributing

information on behalf of the Social Democrats, a political party that the Austrian fascists had declared illegal because of its resistance to fascist rule. Gardiner rented a second apartment where she hid Joseph Buttinger, then head of the Revolutionary Socialists, a group coordinating the Austrian underground to fight the fascists. By hiding Buttinger and carrying messages between him and exiles in Czechoslovakia—everything needed to keep the group going—she played a considerable role in ensuring the survival of the Resistance. Gardiner concealed messages in books delivered to a librarian, who then used invisible ink to conceal the notes in letters she sent to relatives in Czechoslovakia, where many socialist leaders had fled. When the messages were too dangerous to put on paper, Gardiner relayed them in person, taking the train to Brno.

Her messaging service worked smoothly for several years, until her librarian contact was arrested in 1937. Gardiner continued her work. Then, one morning, the Gestapo showed up at the hotel room she was using as a base of operations.

“I had often pictured—or thought I was picturing—a confrontation with the Gestapo, but the picture was nothing like the reality,” she writes. “I had not foreseen the physical aspects—my wildly beating heart, the weakness in my knees. Nor had I experienced in my imagination the panic that now overwhelmed me.”





Jane Fonda, left, and Vanessa Redgrave as the title character in the 1977 film Julia, adapted from a story likely based on Gardiner's life. © 20th Century Fox / Everett Collection

After what turned out to be a routine interview, Gardiner recalled feeling immense relief and then eating a large breakfast—a detail that impressed Carol Seigel, the recently retired director of the Freud Museum in London, founded in 1986 with help from Gardiner (she died in 1985). “It just sort of touched me that it’s just a very human response to danger,” Seigel says.

Gardiner’s grandson Hal Harvey says that such moments —instances of simple sanity amid existential terror—help explain the renewed interest in her story. “There’s something about an ordinary person doing extraordinary things,” he says. The memoir sold out in about a week when it was reissued in September 2021 and is now in its second printing.

In the 1970s, Gardiner once asked the director of the Documentation Center of Austrian Resistance, a nonpartisan group founded by former members of the Resistance, if he knew of any other American women who’d been involved in the underground. He did not. When he asked former Resistance workers the same question, the answer always came back the same: “Only Mary.”

Gardiner's postwar work also saved many lives—but, until now, Buttinger has received most of the recognition. After fleeing Europe for New York in 1939, Gardiner and Buttinger, now her husband, became key players in the establishment and development of global refugee outreach and resettlement efforts. During the war, Gardiner wrote so many affidavits to the American consul in Vienna to support refugees headed to the U.S. that the consul stopped accepting her letters.

Together with Buttinger, Gardiner successfully lobbied first lady Eleanor Roosevelt to help arrange emergency visas for around 200 of the most endangered refugees in France, many of them Austrian and German citizens whom the Nazis were hunting. As late as 1948, Gardiner was sending monthly food packages to a list of 100 European families.

With several colleagues, in 1940 Gardiner and Buttinger organized what would become the Emergency Rescue Committee, which in 1942 merged with the International Relief Association to become the International Rescue Committee (IRC). In 1945, Gardiner spent time in France as the IRC's Western European supervisor. In her 2010 biography of Gardiner, [Muriel's War](#), Sheila Isenberg writes that some Austrians referred to Gardiner as their “good fairy,” and considered her and Buttinger to be “mythical figures: Aunt Muriel and Uncle Joe.” In Vienna, citizens honored Gardiner with a square, Muriel-Gardiner-Buttinger-Platz, in 1989. It's quite modest—a hidden gem, not unlike its namesake, whose humanitarian work and bold career are finally getting the attention they deserve.

Another Form of Aid

Gardiner also supported many artists—including the celebrated painter Alice Neel

By Rebecca Worby



Alice Neel's 1966 portrait of Muriel Gardiner Courtesy the Estate of Alice Neel and Xavier Hufkens, Brussels Photo-credit: HV-studio

Though Muriel Gardiner was best known for her support of

refugees, she also donated millions of dollars over her lifetime to educational and artistic causes. One of her most consequential cultural subsidies was to Alice Neel: From 1964 until Neel's death in 1984, Gardiner provided the painter with a stipend of \$6,000 a year (about \$58,000 today). The two had been introduced by John Rothschild, a businessman and a longtime friend of Neel's.

Born in Pennsylvania, Neel is considered one of the great 20th-century American realist painters. She once called herself a "collector of souls." Her expressive portraits, with subjects ranging from ordinary people to luminaries such as Frank O'Hara, demonstrate the artist's sensitive evocation of the human psyche. In a 1978 interview, discussing how "psychological acumen" was her greatest strength, Neel mused: "In the process of painting someone, I reveal not only what shows, but what doesn't show."

In 1966, Neel painted a portrait of Gardiner at the latter's Upper East Side residence—unusual for Neel, who typically painted her subjects at her own home. Gardiner appears forthright and knowing, her gaze steady, as though she is seeing right into the viewer's—or, perhaps, the painter's—thoughts. Yet the canvas was never exhibited until last year, when the Belgian gallery Xavier Hufkens mounted a [retrospective](#) of Neel's work.

Gardiner never sought public credit for her patronage of Neel, which came at a moment of increased interest in Neel's work. Gardiner's daughter, Connie Harvey, has said that she often learned about her mother's largesse indirectly, when "someone would come out of the blue and say, 'Your mother paid for my education,' or this or that."

"She wanted no thanks," says Gardiner's biographer, Sheila

Isenberg. “She believed in freedom, the freedom that comes from having the financial security to live one’s own best life.”

[Holocaust](#) [Philanthropy](#) [Refugees](#) [Women's History](#) [World War II](#)

Recommended Videos

This French Woman Risked Her Life to Document Nazi Theft

During the Nazi occupation of France, many valuable works of art were stolen from the Jeu de Paume museum and relocated to Germany. One brave French woman kept detailed notes of the thefts

0 seconds of 3 minutes, 45 seconds Volume 0%