

# SHEILA ISENBERG

From [www.sheilaisenberg.com](http://www.sheilaisenberg.com)

Sheila Isenberg's most recent book is *Muriel's War: An American Heiress in the Nazi Resistance* (Palgrave). Isenberg is also author of *A Hero of Our Own: The Story of Varian Fry* (Random House) – named a notable book by *The St. Louis Post-Dispatch* and featured on the web site of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum – and the groundbreaking *Women Who Love Men Who Kill* (Simon & Schuster). She is co-author with the late William M. Kunstler of *My Life as a Radical Lawyer* (Carol Publishing) and collaborator with Tracey Brown on *The Life and Times of Ron Brown* (William Morrow). Isenberg's books have been translated into other languages and she has appeared in documentaries and on multiple media platforms, including NPR, CNN, "20/20," "The Today Show," and "Good Morning America."



Born in New York City, Sheila Isenberg earned a B.A. in English from Brooklyn College and studied in the graduate English Department of Hunter College. A former award-winning reporter, she is now adjunct professor of English at Marist College and lives with her husband in New York's Hudson Valley.

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**By: Mary Lou Davis, AAUW**

## Muriel's War by Sheila Isenberg

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A former award-winning reporter, Sheila has appeared on NPR, CNN, "20/20," "The Today Show," and "Good Morning America."

*Muriel's War* is the story of a courageous woman who left a life of privilege for a world of danger and international espionage. Muriel Gardiner was born into a wealthy meatpacking dynasty in Chicago and was educated at Wellesley College. She renounced her family's materialistic lifestyle and left the United States to study at Oxford and then to train at the University of Vienna medical school as a psychoanalyst with her friend Anna Freud.

Muriel was drawn into the dangerous world of Austrian politics. In Vienna she fell in love with Joseph Buttinger, a leader of the Austrian underground. When Germany annexed Austria in 1938, Muriel began to help Jews and anti-fascists escape, smuggling forged documents across borders and risking her own life.

Eventually, after leaving Europe with Joe and her daughter to return to America, she used her wealth and connections to continue to rescue many still trapped behind enemy lines. Muriel became a prominent psychoanalyst and was one of the founders of the International Rescue Committee.

Sheila's book tells the story of Muriel's courage and humanistic zeal. Muriel was a feminist, a socialist, a sensualist, an eminent psychoanalyst and a hero of the Austrian resistance against Hitler.

# Muriel's War: An American Heiress in the Nazi Resistance

From [www.sheilaisenberg.com](http://www.sheilaisenberg.com)

Available now from Palgrave Macmillan

**The captivating story of a courageous woman who left a life of privilege for a world of danger and international espionage**

Born into a wealthy meatpacking dynasty in Chicago and educated at Wellesley, raven-haired beauty Muriel Gardiner renounced her family's materialistic lifestyle and as a young woman left the United States. First studying at Oxford, then attending the University of Vienna medical school, Muriel befriended Anna Freud and studied the fledgling science of psychoanalysis just as the dark clouds of Hitler's war were moving across Europe. During this tumultuous time, she married twice, had a daughter and, in Vienna, fell in love with a leader of the Austrian underground. When Germany finally annexed Austria in March of 1938, Muriel began to help Jews and anti-fascists escape, smuggling forged documents across borders and risking her own life. Eventually, she left Europe for New York—but using her wealth and vast network of connections, continued to rescue many still trapped behind enemy lines.

Here, for the first time this electrifying woman who impressed everyone she met with her intelligence and powerful personality, receives her due. An American heiress turned resistance hero, Muriel went on to become an eminent psychoanalyst, and was a founder of the International Rescue Committee. Drawing from Gardiner's unpublished writings and interviews with those who knew her best, Sheila Isenberg offers Muriel's astonishing story of moral courage and humanistic zeal. With all its twists and turns, this inspiring account reveals a heroic woman who lives on as a legend of her time.

## Women's History Month Profile: Muriel Gardiner

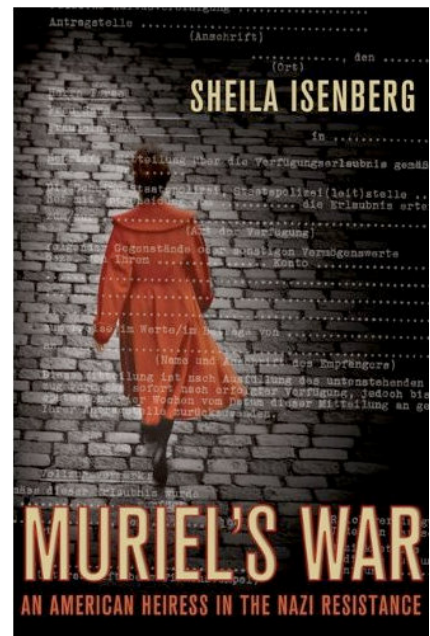
From Women in Communications [www.nywici.org](http://www.nywici.org)

*March is Women's History Month. We continue our profiles of inspiring women with the story of Muriel Gardiner — feminist, rulebreaker, author, psychoanalyst and World War II resistance fighter.*

— by [Sheila Isenberg](http://www.sheilaisenberg.com)

Sheila Isenberg is the author of **Muriel's War: An American Heiress in the Nazi Resistance**

When Helen Muriel Morris entered the world on November 23, 1901, her hometown of Chicago was, along with the rest of America, on the cusp of a new century and a new world. No one in the Morris mansion, built on the sweat of immigrant laborers toiling in her family's meatpacking empire, knew that the little red-faced babe would go on to become an important



*Muriel Gardiner*

part of this new world as a feminist, a socialist, a sensualist, an eminent psychoanalyst and a hero of the Austrian resistance against Hitler.

As a young girl, she was inspired by the rhetoric and charisma of feminist leader [Inez Milholland](#), who spoke to a rapt Chicago audience that included Helen Muriel and her companion nurse-governess. The child soon organized a junior march of suffragists down the wide broad boulevard in front of the palatial structure that was her home. Milholland's rallying speech was her first exposure to the issue of women's rights.

It would not be her last. Not long after she left home at 16 to attend Wellesley College, she flung off her much-despised first name and became just Muriel, much as she rid herself of expensive clothing, jewelry and furs. Under the influence of the school's progressive women professors, Muriel became radicalized and by senior year led the campus in not only sports and academics but political activism. By the time she graduated in 1922, the young woman knew for certain that she would not live as a wealthy socialite. A socialist, she would take another path, although she as yet had no idea what that path would be.

Her years in Europe were financed by her family trust fund; although she renounced their values, she never gave up their money, and this allowed her to pursue a life of humanism and humanitarianism — and a lifestyle of numerous love affairs and sexual experimentation.

During her twenties and early thirties, she married twice, had a daughter and satisfied her sensual side with many love affairs, including one transcendent relationship with British poet Sir Stephen Spender. She also underwent psychoanalysis and, after meeting Freud and becoming friends with his daughter Anna, decided to become an analyst herself. She thought that was the best way to help others, although she recognized that it would take many years of study.

At the same time, in the early 1930s, she was drawn into the violent, dangerous world of Austrian politics, with its wide schism between the progressive Social Democrats and the regressive Christian Democrats; the tiny Austrian Nazi Party also played its part setting off bombs and beating people and generally trying to destabilize the situation.

Muriel joined an underground cell of socialists in 1934 and began aiding Jews (the Austrian government was anti-Semitic) and Social Democrats. Some just needed financial help, but most needed assistance in fleeing the country.

By this time, she had fallen in love with the man with whom she'd spend the rest of her life, socialist leader Joseph Buttinger. Muriel and Joe and others continued their resistance to the fascist government and then, when Hitler invaded Austria in March 1938, as Joe fled to avoid arrest, Muriel took over a leadership position.

For several months, on her own, she helped hundreds of Jews and antifascists to escape, using her cover as a wealthy American medical student as protection. Soon, convinced the Nazis were watching her, she left Austria and met Joe and her daughter in Paris. There Muriel and Joe continued their resistance work and then, when war broke out, she reluctantly agreed to marry him; she loved him, yes, but was opposed to institutional marriage. In this case, though, she had no choice as his life depended on being able to sail to America as the husband of a U.S. citizen.

Once in New York, Muriel continued aiding refugees fleeing Hitler, helped to found the International Rescue Committee, and continued her studies. She eventually became a psychoanalyst and, from 1940 on, lived with her husband and daughter in Manhattan and in a beloved old farmhouse in Pennington, N.J.

At Brookdale Farm, Muriel engaged in a private psychoanalytic practice at first, then ended that to work with children in the New Jersey public schools, eventually taking on a most troubled population, adolescents who had committed murder.

Her great wealth went into a foundation that supported women's rights, civil rights, birth control, and other progressive causes. Her friends included Albert Einstein, her neighbor in nearby Princeton, Anna Freud and other leading Freudian analysts, as well as artists and writers with whom she enjoyed an active social life.

Late in life, Muriel wrote several books, including a memoir of her time in the resistance, **Code Name Mary**. It was her attempt to set the record straight after noted playwright Lillian Hellman created her portrait of golden girl "Julia."

Muriel never assumed that she was Julia, although most of her friends did and, as it turned out, Muriel and Hellman had a connection: they shared the same lawyer. From 1939 on, when Muriel returned from Europe, he told Hellman tales of the beautiful and brave Muriel Gardiner. The creative Hellman used Muriel's life for three memorable characters: Sara Muller in the film "Watch on the Rhine" as well as Alice in **An Unfinished Woman** and Julia in **Pentimento**, both memoirs.

But Muriel Gardiner was not murdered by the Nazis as was Hellman's Julia. Nor did her daughter die in Europe, as did Julia's child. The real resistance hero lived a long and satisfying life, aiding refugees from other wars, including the Hungarian Revolution, working with troubled children and providing money to pay for college for countless young people.

When Muriel Gardiner finally died, after garnering medals and honors for her work resisting the Nazis, it was on her own terms. She died peacefully on February 6, 1983, not far from her beloved Brookdale Farm.

## Reviews

### ***WWD Magazine, Aug. 22, 2011***

"Also interesting is "**Muriel's War: An American Heiress in the Nazi Resistance**" by Sheila Isenberg (Palgrave Macmillan). Muriel Gardiner was a brunette beauty who was the heiress to a Chicago meatpacking fortune, but, rather than become a socialite, she studied at Oxford and went to the University of Vienna medical school training as a psychoanalyst with Anna Freud. After the Anschluss, she used her money and connections to help ferry Jews and political opponents of the Nazis to safety. Later, she returned to New York, but continued her rescue work. Gardiner became a prominent psychoanalyst and was one of the founders of the International Rescue Committee. Her life story was probably the model for Lillian Hellman's "Julia," although there are important differences, and those make the Hellman book fiction."

### ***The Jerusalem Post, April 28, 2011***

"With **Muriel's War**, **Sheila Isenberg** has performed an act of historic justice, at long last giving Muriel Gardiner the credit she deserves for her acts of courage and selflessness."

### ***The Boston Globe, Dec. 26, 2010***

"Terrible times can elicit extraordinary deeds even from ordinary people, and Muriel Gardner was anything but ordinary ... If some portion of Gardiner's story sounds familiar, it's because Lillian Hellman ... hijacked it for her allegedly autobiographical account of the woman she called 'Julia' ... [Muriel's War sets] the story straight about this intrepid American heroine."

### ***America in World War II Magazine, Oct. 1, 2010***

"It is simplest to put it this way: privilege, exotic friendships, intellectual adventure, international intrigue, and danger marked the life story of American heiress Muriel Gardiner. But that doesn't cover this woman's contribution to the history of World War II, the magnetism that drew a fascinating string of lovers to her, nor her nerve in using her wealth to save countless lives from the rolling Nazi juggernaut in the 1930s and 40s. It seems like the stuff movies are made of. And in Gardiner's case, maybe it was."

***Library Journal*, Oct. 25, 2010**

“Muriel Gardner was a beautiful, electrifying woman who mixed with high society, was a part of Sigmund Freud’s inner circle, and eventually joined the Austrian underground, where she helped thousands of Jews and anti-Fascists escape the Nazis. Her remarkable life story continued after the war with philanthropy and preservation of Freud’s memory.”

***Kirkus Reviews*, Nov. 11, 2010**

“In many ways, Muriel Gardiner’s existence was the embodiment of the American dream ... With a keen eye for detail, Isenberg explores Gardiner’s life and admirable sacrifices.”

***San Diego Jewish World*, Nov. 3, 2010**

“The life of Muriel Gardiner ... is truly heartwarming – the number of lives she saved, or at least had a hand in saving, was incredibly great. And the saga of her long, adventurous life makes thoroughly fascinating reading ... Biographer Sheila Isenberg delves quite deeply into Muriel’s personality, drawing on Muriel’s own writings and the recollections of her wide circle of acquaintances ... the narrative tells not only a detailed story of her life, but also adds greatly to our knowledge of life in Europe as events marched inexorably toward the catastrophe of World War II.”

***Chicago Jewish Star*, Jan. 28-Feb. 10, 2011**

“A new biography Muriel’s War ... is a story of courage and heroism. Chicago-born Muriel Gardiner was the daughter of a Protestant mother and a Jewish father, and heiress to a meatpacking fortune ... [S]he went to Vienna and after Germany invaded Austria, she began to help Jews and others escape. It’s a fascinating story that deserves to be widely known.”

***Library Journal***

“Muriel Gardner was a beautiful, electrifying woman who mixed with high society, was a part of Sigmund Freud’s inner circle, and eventually joined the Austrian underground, where she helped thousands of Jews and anti-Fascists escape the Nazis. Her remarkable life story continued after the war with philanthropy and preservation of Freud’s memory.”