

VAKAR FAMILY COLLECTION, 1925-2013
2016.389.1

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Archives
100 Raoul Wallenberg Place SW
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Descriptive summary

Title: Vakar family collection

Dates: 1925-2013.

Accession number: 2016.389.1.

Creator: Chvany, Catherine Vakar.

Extent: 1 box (0.5 linear foot)

Repository: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Archives, 100 Raoul Wallenberg Place SW,
Washington, DC 20024-2126

Abstract: Correspondence, memoirs, manuscripts, news clippings, postcards, and other documents and materials related to the immigration of the Vakar family from France to the United States in 1940-1941, as well as the role of the American aid workers who helped them, Martha and Waitstill Sharp. Collection includes postcards and correspondence from the period of their immigration, later memoirs written by various members of the family recounting their experiences during their escape and their arrival in the United States, as well as news clippings and other material from later commemorations of the Sharps' activities, including a reunion in 1990 of those who were saved by their actions.

Languages: English, French, Russian

Administrative Information

Access: Collection is open for use, but is stored offsite. Please contact the Reference Desk more than seven days prior to visit in order to request access.

Reproduction and use: Collection is available for use. Material may be protected by copyright. Please contact reference staff for further information.

Preferred citation: (Identification of item), Vakar family collection (2016.389.1), United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Archives, Washington, DC.

Acquisition information: Gift of Catherine Vakar Chvany, 2016.

Related archival materials: The papers of Nicholas Vakar are held at the Bakhmeteff Archive, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University (<http://library.columbia.edu/find/archives-portal.html>). This collection includes his diary from the years 1938-1940, and other writings.

Accruals: Accruals may have been received since this collection was first processed, see archives catalog at collections.ushmm.org for further information.

Processing history: Processed by Brad Bauer, September 2016.

Biographical note

Catherine Vakar Chvany (born 1927) and Anna Vakar (born 1929) were the daughters of Nicholas (1894-1970) and Gertrude (née Clifton, 1904-1973, also known as “Gertruda”) Vakar, Russian emigres who had settled in France after the Russian Revolution. Nicholas was employed as a journalist for Russian-language periodicals in Paris, and Gertrude, whose family was of English ancestry, had been sent to England after the Revolution, and then to Paris to complete her schooling. The parents raised both daughters in Russian traditions, speaking the language at home, and taking the children to a Russian cultural center to study Russian language, history, religion, and culture.

In 1939 the family moved from Nogent-sur-Marne to an apartment in Saint-Mandé (Val-de-Marne), but following the start of World War II that fall, the daughters, who had been away at a camp that summer, were evacuated with other children to the south of France, and after being sent to a number of different locations, they ended up in Pau, in the department of Basses-Pyrénées (present-day Pyrénées-Atlantiques). Following the German invasion of France in June 1940, and the subsequent occupation of Paris, the girls’ parents came south and joined them in Pau, entrusting their apartment in Saint Mandé and their belongings to a friend, Boris Pross (Prossiukoff), who sold everything and sent the proceeds to the Vakars. While in Pau, the Vakars learned of the activities of various relief organizations who assisted refugees and sought to help them emigrate. At this time, the Unitarian Service Committee, and aid workers Waitstill and Martha Sharp, were assembling a group of fifty children to send to the United States, all of whom were either stateless or citizens of countries other than France. Catherine and Anna were able to be included in this group, and leaving their parents in Pau, travelled with this group through Spain and Portugal, from where they sailed to the United States, arriving in New York in December 1940. After several weeks in New York, the sisters were placed with the family of Kerr and Elsie Atkinson, in Wellesley Hills, Massachusetts, where they remained until their parents were able to immigrate in August 1941.

The Vakar family settled in the Boston area, eventually moving into a house in Jamaica Plain, and later in Watertown. Nicholas Vakar obtained a doctorate at Harvard, and taught Russian at Wheaton College, in Norton, Massachusetts. Catherine went to college at Radcliffe, and eventually earned a doctorate in Slavic languages and literature from Harvard in 1965, and taught Russian at Wellesley and M.I.T.

Scope and content of collection

The Vakar family papers consist of correspondence, memoirs, manuscripts, news clippings, postcards, and other documents and materials related to the immigration of the Vakar family from France to the United States in 1940-1941, as well as the role of the American aid workers who helped them, Martha and Waitstill Sharp. Collection includes postcards and correspondence from the period of their immigration, later memoirs written by various members of the family recounting their experiences

during their escape and their arrival in the United States, as well as news clippings and other material from later commemorations of the Sharps' activities, including a reunion in 1990 of those who were saved by their actions.

Material from the period of the family's emigration includes family photographs, documents of Nicholas Vakar, including his safe-conduct pass from 1940 and writers union membership card, the Unitarian Service Committee application used by Catherine Vakar that enabled her to leave France with the group of children assembled by Martha Sharp, a letter from Catherine Vakar to her mother, which was sent from Portugal, as well as correspondence to and from Nicholas and Gertrude Vakar. Among the latter there are letters that the Vakars sent to the Atkinsons and other benefactors in the United States, both prior to and after their departure from France, a telegram and letter from Kerr Atkinson related to the arrival of Mr. and Mrs. Vakar in the United States, and letters from family friend Boris Pross, related to his activities in dissolving their apartment in Saint-Mandé. The Atkinsons also kept a small diary or notebook related to the arrival of the Vakar daughters at their home in January 1941, and a few pages from that are included in this collection.

Later material includes typescript essays written by various members of the Vakar family, including accounts by Nicholas and Gertrude of their passage from France to the United States, and essays written in later years by Anna and Catherine describing their own voyage to the United States, and their early months living with the Atkinson family. A letter from 1974 by Boris Pross, addressed to Anna, describes his role in selling the family's apartment and belongings in 1940, and a compilation of the poetry of Gertrude Vakar, gathered and published by Catherine in 1984, is also included. During the 50th anniversary commemoration of the founding of the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee in 1989-1990, there were several events in and around Boston remembering their work, including a reunion with Martha Waitstill Cogan and the surviving adult children she had brought to the United States, and material from these events, including the text of a speech by Catherine Vakar Chvany, is included. Also included is later material, dating from 2007-2009, about a proposed documentary film by Artemis Joukowsky, the grandson of the Sharps, which was eventually released as a documentary produced by Ken Burns in 2016.

System of arrangement

The Vakar family papers are arranged by document type and/or subject, as one series, in alphabetic order by folder title.

Indexing terms

Personal names

Vakar, Gertruda, 1904-1973.

Vakar, Nicholas P. (Nicholas Platonovich), 1894-1970.

Sharp Cogan, Martha, 1905-1999.

Vakar, Anna.

Topical headings

France--Emigration and immigration.

World War, 1939-1945--Jews--Rescue--France.

Political refugees--France.

World War, 1939-1945--Refugees.

Refugees--Massachusetts.

Geographical headings

Pau (France)

Wellesley Hills (Mass.)

CONTAINER LIST

<i>Box</i>	<i>Folder</i>	
		Atkinson family
1	1	General: Includes description of neighborhood of Nilesville, where Atkinsons lived, by William Atkinson, 2013; poem by Kerr Atkinson, undated; and sketch of floorplan of Atkinson home, by Gertrude Vakar, undated.
1	2	Pages from notebook kept by family, describing arrival of Vakar daughters, Three leaves, 1941
		Commemoration
1	3	Biography of Martha Sharp Cogan: "To Try the Soul's Strength," by Ghanda di Figlia, typescript, 105 pages, 1998
1	4	Documentary film project, about Sharps, 2007-2009
1	5	News clippings, 1941-2013
1	6	Reunion of survivors with Martha Sharp Cogan, 1990
1	7	Unitarian-Universalist Service Committee 50 th anniversary, including text of Speech given by Catherine V. Chvany, 1989
		Correspondence
1	8	Pross, Boris, to Gertrude Vakar, 1940, 1947
1	9	Vakar, Gertrude, to Mrs. Atkinson/Elsie, 1941-1942
1	10	Vakar, Nicolas, regarding emigration, April 1941
1	11	Genealogy of Vakar family (Russian), undated
1	12	Photographs, of Vakar and Atkinson families, and home, 1939-1942, 2001, and undated
1	13	Postcards, addressed to members of Vakar family, in Pau, France, 1940-1941
		Travel
1	14	Atkinson, Kerr: letter welcoming Nicolas and Gertrude Vakar to United States, July 7, 1941
1	15	Atkinson, Kerr: Telegram to Elsie Atkinson, on vacation, informing her of arrival of Nicolas and Gertrude Vakar in New York, July 16, 1941
1	16	Unitarian Service Committee: application for Catherine Vakar, 1940
1	17	Vakar, Catherine: Letter to her mother, in Russian (with English translation), Sent from school in Portugal, 12 December 1940
1	18	Vakar, Nicholas: membership cards in writers' unions, France, 1925-1934
1	19	Vakar, Nicholas: safe-conduct passes, France, 1940
		Writings and memoirs
1	20	Chvany, Catherine Vakar: Memoir written for Radcliffe reunion, 2000.
1	21	Pross, Boris: Account of liquidation of Vakars' apartment in Paris, summer 1940, as recounted in letter to Anna Vakar, 1974, in Russian with English translation provided.
1	22	Vakar, Anna: various autobiographical essays, concerning journey from France to United States, 1985-1990
1	23	Vakar, Gertrude: account of crossing of Atlantic, undated, circa 1940s.

<i>Box</i>	<i>Folder</i>	
1	24	Vakar, Gertrude: poetry, as assembled for publication by Catherine Chvany, 1984
1	25	Vakar, Gertrude: summaries of letters received from family and friends in France,
1	26	Vakar, Nicolas: account of escape from Paris, undated, circa 1940s, in English translation by Anna Vakar, 1976.