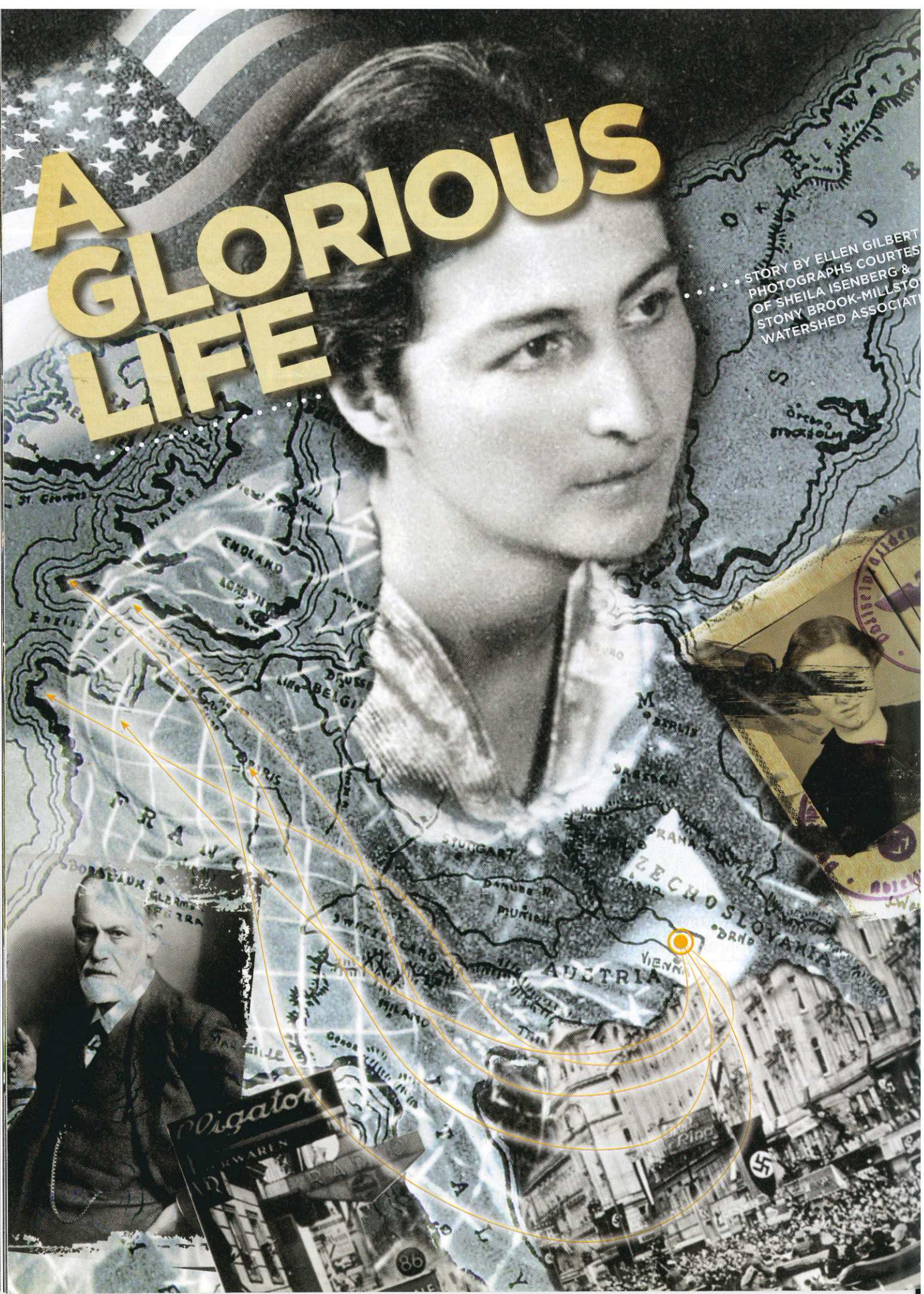


# A GLORIOUS LIFE

STORY BY ELLEN GILBERT  
PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY  
OF SHEILA ISENBERG &  
STONY BROOK-MILLSTONE  
WATERSHED ASSOCIATION





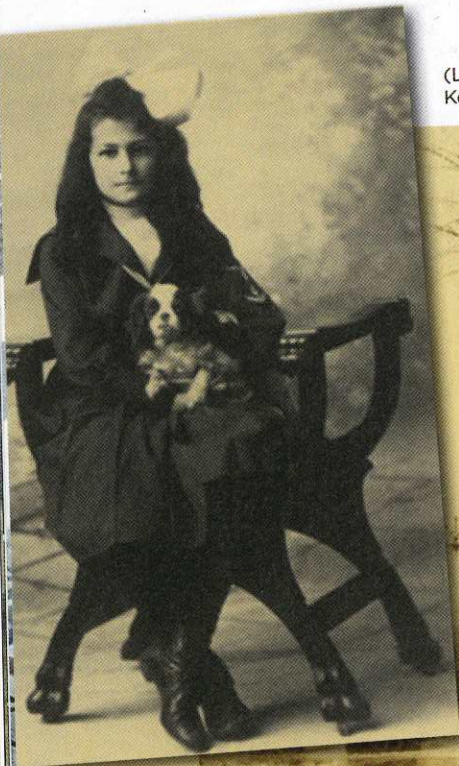


**Philanthropist...Check.  
Intellectual...Check.  
Anti-Fascist Activist...Check.  
Woman of Passion...Double check.**

An author or movie-maker would be hard-pressed to imagine all the details of Muriel Gardiner's (1901-1985) turbulent, fascinating life.



(Left) Another Bow: portrait of Muriel. Courtesy of E. M. Bakwin. (below) The Morris family mansion, Kenwood section of Chicago. Courtesy of Andrea Selch, Archivist, The Morris Family Archives



She was heir to the fortunes amassed by Chicago's Morris and Swift meatpacking empires. As a ten year-old child, however, she hid in a closet to read *The Jungle*, Upton Sinclair's expose of abuses in the meatpacking industry, and early on she perceived the inequities between her privileged existence and those less fortunate. Coming east to attend Wellesley College, she soaked up ideas that became ideals for living an engaged life. Moving on to study in Oxford and traveling around Europe, she met new friends and lovers before she zeroed in on Vienna as a home-base where she would study medicine and psychoanalysis (and become, along the way, Stephen Spender's first female lover). She applied her fortune—and no small amount of courage—to help Jews and anti-Fascists escape before and during World War II, a story that later inspired Lillian Hellman's book *Pentimento*, which became *Julia*, a successful movie starring Jane Fonda as Lillian and Vanessa Redgrave, luminously embodying Hellmann's supposed friend, the heroine, Julia. Gardiner would later set the record straight with her own book, *Code Name "Mary" Memoirs of an American Woman in the Austrian Underground*.

Amazingly, the story doesn't end there, and the rest has particular resonance for Princeton-area residents. Gardiner, her daughter, Connie, and her third husband, Joseph Buttinger, settled

in Pennington after the war and lived there, on what was then called Brookdale Farm, for 40 years. Gardiner's zeal for meaningful work was undiminished; she worked with troubled youths and authored a book called *The Deadly Innocents: Portraits of Children Who Kill*. Her indomitable sense of social responsibility led her to donate her 500+ acre farm and the buildings on it (as well as some additional property, purchased later on) to one of central New Jersey's first environmental groups, the Stony Brook-Millstone Watershed Association.

Author Sheila Isenberg's new book, *Muriel's War*, is another corrective to Hellman. Subtitled *An American Heiress in the Nazi Resistance*, it vividly depicts Gardiner's wartime activities while also offering a sense of her life before and after World War II.

"The thing that makes me happiest is when people say, 'I couldn't put the book down,'" says Isenberg. One reader reported being so engaged in Gardiner's story that she cried and "felt bereft" at the end, adding that "Muriel spent her money better than anyone I know."

Isenberg learned about Gardiner while doing research for her previous book about another unsung war hero, Varian Fry. In *A Hero of Our Own* (2001), Isenberg detailed how Fry, a writer and editor, went to Marseilles, France in June, 1940. Representing a newly formed private American relief committee, he offered aid and advice

to anti-Fascist refugees. Isenberg's other books include *My Life as a Radical Lawyer* (written with William M. Kunstler and published in 1994), and *Women Who Love Men Who Kill* (1991).

The encomiums on the back cover of *Muriel's War* are not from the usual gamut of recently-published, well-known literati. Instead, people like International Rescue Committee President George Rupp and Eleanor Roosevelt Center Chair JoAnne Myers weigh in on the book's strengths and its remarkable subject.

"Sheila Isenberg tells Muriel Gardiner's extraordinary story exceedingly well,"





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fill the fife!  
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writes Rupp. “*Muriel’s War* portrays the energetic idealism and exceptional generosity of its subject with admiration, even devotion.” Myers suggests that while we “see what makes Gardiner human and what makes her a hero...most of all we see how one woman can make a difference in the lives of many.”

The story is far from finished. Isenberg reports that there are “a lot of cardboard boxes with unsorted material” in Gardiner’s daughter’s house in Colorado. Muriel “did not think she would be famous,” she adds. Isenberg says that while Gardiner “left all the good stuff out of *Code Name “Mary,”* Isenberg was able to utilize some notes for an unpublished memoir that she “found,” along with a 400-page oral history made with Gardiner decades ago and housed at Columbia University.

Other material awaiting discovery and attention includes a series of essays Gardiner wrote in response to the racism she observed at a psychiatric hospital in New Jersey. “She was horrified by what she saw,” says Isenberg. “She really devoted her life to political and social justice.” Isenberg acknowledges Gardiner’s selflessness by including poet Thomas Osbert Mordaunt’s “The Call” in the front matter of *Muriel’s War*: “Sound, sound the clarion, fill the fife! Throughout the sensual world proclaim, One crowded hour of glorious life Is worth an age without a name.”

## THE WATERSHED

While some details are missing, the Stony Brook-Millstone Association archives note the presence of “Mrs. B.” at early organizational meetings in the 1950s, and current Executive Director Jim Walton surmises that Gardiner was, over time, encouraged to donate what was then known as Brookdale Farm. Once she made up her mind to do so, she and her family moved out of the building that now houses Watershed Administration offices, and into an adjacent ranch house, which is now home to the Buttinger Nature Center. With loads of hands-on teaching tools and lots of live critters, the Center is a veritable hub of activities for youngsters throughout the year, and particularly in summer when nature-centric camps take full advantage of the area.

“We feel that the work we do is very consistent with who she was,” observes Walton, who describes himself as “awed and honored” to be working at the 60-year-old reserve made possible by Gardiner’s early, signal donation of land and buildings. “Like us, she tried to improve people’s lives, protect things that are cherished, and help the less fortunate.” More specifically, the Watershed has identified four cornerstones that anchor its wide-ranging efforts to provide clean water and protect the environment: Conservation, Science, Advocacy, and Education. Thus, while some staffers are busily peering into microscopes as they examine stream samples collected by the organization’s many volunteers, others might be down in Trenton lobbying for sustainable-friendly legislation, while others are visiting

(Below) Brookdale Farm in Pennington. Muriel’s home for the last four decades of her life. Courtesy of Tom Grimes, and The Stony Brook-Millstone Watershed Association



a local school to teach youngsters about how they can be part of caring for the environment. Still others might be found in the butterfly house located next to the Nature Center.

The quality of the Association’s stewardship was acknowledged in 2009 with the N.J. Governor’s Environmental Excellence Award. The Association casts a wide net, protecting a 265-square-mile area of central New Jersey that drains to the Millstone River and its tributaries, including the Stony Brook. Five counties and 26 towns are under its purview, with a wide range of wildlife habitats, dense forests, grasslands, farmland, and sensitive wetlands.

In addition to her initial contribution, Gardiner later agreed to buy acreage that now comprises the Honey Brook Organic Farm. A \$150,000 legacy from Gardiner has assured the Association’s continued existence, and, in addition to regular staff and interns, some 250 volunteers at numerous outposts keep up with day-to-day operations. Stream clean-ups and stream-watching figure significantly in the Association’s work. Plans for the future include melding the Association’s several properties into a more continuous whole, and removing or breaching aging, 18th-century dams in order to open up 14 miles of the Millstone River to aquatic wildlife and recreational users. Ever-conscious of preservationists’ concerns, Walton promises to “preserve and interpret” the history of the area, while making it possible for blocked American shad and other fish to migrate up the rivers to reproduce. Sounds like a plan Muriel Gardiner would applaud.

For more information on the Stony Brook-Millstone Association visit [www.thewatershed.org](http://www.thewatershed.org). For more information on *Muriel’s War*, visit [www.sheilaisenberg.com](http://www.sheilaisenberg.com). ■