

**STORY OF WWII AMERICAN DIPLOMAT
HIRAM “HARRY” BINGHAM IV
PACIFIC CLUB HONOLULU, HAWAII
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By Robert Kim Bingham, Sr.

GREETINGS, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN. I’m grateful to the Mercury Business Association for inviting my wife Anne and me to share a meal with you at this elegant Pacific Club.

I also appreciate the opportunity to speak about my late father, Hiram Bingham IV, of Salem, CT, who was called “Harry” Bingham by his family and friends.

He was a humble religious man, whom I loved, and with whom my ten brothers and sisters and I grew up in Salem, Connecticut for 45 years until he died peacefully at home in 1988, at the age of 84.

The book I wrote about him is titled **COURAGEOUS DISSENT: *How Harry Bingham Defied His Government to Save Lives*** (Second Edition 2009), which I would be happy to autograph for you after this talk.

RECOGNITION. Today, Harry is recognized as a WWII Holocaust rescuer during 1940-1941, while he served as a U.S. vice consul in Vichy France following the Fall of France to the Nazis.

In 2006, the U.S. Postal Service issued a postage stamp honoring Hiram Bingham IV as a “Distinguished American Diplomat,” for his “Constructive Dissent,” for saving lives in defiance of his government’s restrictive immigration policies.

I was proud to launch the stamp drive in 1998, which received broad bipartisan support in Washington, DC where the stamp was unveiled on Capitol Hill on May 25, 2006. We had obtained support from 40 US Representatives, 40 U.S. Senators, and a unanimous Connecticut legislature.

The late Congressman Tom Lantos, the sole Holocaust survivor in Congress, spoke at the Hiram Bingham IV stamp ceremony in the Nation’s Capital. He said:

Hiram Bingham's courage is an inspiration to us all. In an age when too many chose to ignore the plight of the persecuted, he became directly engaged in their cause at significant risk to himself. Source: Philadelphia Jewish Voice, August 2006.

The other five diplomats depicted in the 2006 "Diplomat Stamp Series" are: **Francis Willis**, the first woman US Ambassador; **Charles Bohlen**, a specialist in Soviet affairs who served Presidents Roosevelt and Truman at the Tehran, Yalta and Potsdam conferences during WWII; **Robert Murphy**, a top aide to Roosevelt during WWII and later Ambassador to Belgium and Japan; **Clifton R. Wharton**, the first black United States Ambassador; and **Philip Habib**, who was a top negotiator for President Reagan in 1981 to prevent war in the Middle East.

IN SHADOW OF ANCESTORS. My father may be remembered as Hiram Bingham Number Four because he grew up in the shadow of three previous Hiram Bingham's who had led extraordinary lives.

His great-grandfather and grandfather, Hiram I & II, were missionaries in the Kingdom of Hawaii, beginning in 1820.

Hiram I made significant contributions to Hawaiian music; education; the Hawaiian written language; and the Constitution. He donated his land to the Punahou School, from which President Barack Obama graduated.

A World War II Liberty Ship was named in honor of this pioneer missionary.

He is the great-great grandfather of Barbara Morgan and me. Barbara (please stand) is the Senior Director of Legacy Planning for the Punahou School. (Thanks, cousin, for your kind hospitality to Anne and me on our visits to beautiful Hawaii.)

Hiram Bingham II, who was both born and buried in Hawaii, likewise spread Christian education to the Gilbert Islands and spent his entire lifetime translating the Bible into the Gilbertese language.

Hiram Bingham III, was Harry's father, who also was born in Hawaii. He was the explorer who uncovered the ruins at Machu Picchu in Peru, who later entered politics and was elected Governor and Senator from Connecticut.

My father, the 4th Hiram Bingham, taught his children that there is a spark of divinity in every human being; and he lived a life pursuing his motto, which was: "Give the best that you have to the best that you know."

Instead of saving souls like his forebears, the best that he knew was to save lives during the nightmare of the Holocaust.

OTHER RIGHTEOUS DIPLOMATS. Other WWII righteous diplomats have deservedly been depicted on US and foreign stamps.

WHAT DID HARRY DO?

- While stationed in Marseilles, he not only wrote visas and planned escapes for renowned artists and intellectuals on Hitler's most wanted list, such as author Lion Feuchtwanger, painter Marc Chagall, and Nobel scientist Otto Meyerhof; but he also issued hundreds, if not thousands, of visas to ordinary refugees flooding into Southern (Vichy) France seeking to escape from Hitler.
- According to the Wyman Institute, while other outposts in France refused to issue visas, refugees "made their way to Marseilles, seeking to reach Harry Bingham for one last chance to live." [Medoff article, 5/6/04]
- In early 1940, Harry Bingham and his colleague, Myles Standish, engineered the escape of prominent anti-Nazi author Lion Feuchtwanger from the Nimes detention facility. Near the camp swimming hole, Lion was spirited into their diplomatic car, disguised as a woman with a shawl, and driven past detention guards to Bingham's villa in Marseilles.
- Harry then hid Lion and his wife, Marta, in his residence for six weeks while planning their escape to America, through Spain.
- Harry provided Lion with a false visa under the name of Mr. "WETCHEEK."
- He also stuffed Marta's backpack with cartons of Camel cigarettes for her to throw under the noses of the Spanish border guards, who would grab them and let her through quickly. She later wrote in her memoir that Harry's plan "worked like a charm," and after crossing into Spain, she never ran down a mountain so fast.
- It was only five years ago that my sister Abigail and her husband Bill Endicott found a letter in our family farmhouse in Salem signed by Mr. "Wetcheek." The author had written to Harry from the steamer

SS Excalibur while heading to America in 1940. He thanked Harry for his help and good company while he was hiding in his home, and I have posted the letter on my website. [Google Robert Kim Bingham.]

- **Worked with Fry.** Bingham also traveled around Vichi France with American journalist Varian Fry, a well-known Righteous Gentile who was sent by the New York Emergency Rescue Committee to Marseilles to rescue targeted individuals, with Eleanor Roosevelt's blessing. They searched for people on Fry's Emergency List.
- Bingham and Fry persuaded Marseilles police to release painter Marc Chagall after he was rounded up with other Jews. Bingham and Fry then helped Chagall escape to America with his wife, Bella. Their thankful granddaughter, Dr. Bella Meyer, spoke at the Capitol Hill unveiling of Harry's stamp, saying that Harry helped keep Chagall's vision alive, which was to teach others how to listen with their hearts and appreciate the beauty of life.
- Meanwhile, at his office, Harry issued many life-saving visas and "affidavits-in-lieu-of-passports" to exiles whose papers had been confiscated or lost. This occurred during his 14-month separation alone from his lovely wife Rose and their four children, who were ordered back to safety in the States in mid-1940.
- Bingham also visited detention camps in southern France and alerted superiors of the inhumane conditions in the facilities, and the suffering and dying of old and young men, women, and children who were detained for eventual deportation to extermination camps elsewhere in Europe.
- There is evidence that the Nazis complained to Washington about Bingham's activities. The U.S. had not yet entered the war and was, on the surface, a neutral country.
- **TAPED INTERVIEW.** In a tape-recorded interview around 1980, Harry told his 13-year old granddaughter Tiffany Bingham Cunningham how he defied his superiors in the office:

"[M]y boss... said, 'The Germans are going to win the war. Why should we do anything to offend them?' And he didn't want to give

any visas to ‘these Jewish people.’ So, in a way, I had to do as much as I could.”

HULL’S TELEGRAM. On September 18, 1940, U.S. Secretary of State Cordell Hull sent a stern telegram to the American Embassy in France condemning the rescue activities of American citizens who “violated the laws of friendly nations.” The telegram read:

“[While the] Department is sympathetic to the plight of unfortunate refugees...this government **can not repeat not** countenance the activities of ...Mr. Fry and other persons, however well-meaning their motives may be, in carrying on activities evading the laws of countries with which the United States maintains friendly relations” (Emphasis added.)

Secretary Hull’s telegram reveals the State Department’s consternation regarding the activities of “Varian Fry...and others.” It was clearly aimed at Bingham.

At that time, he and Fry were running the underground rescue operation from Bingham’s house, which included planning escapes and hiding refugees there, including the Feuchtwangers, Thomas Mann’s brother and nephew, and others.

Secretary Hull made it clear that American citizens were forbidden to violate the laws “of friendly nations.”

My father was aware that France’s armistice agreement with Germany required France to ‘**surrender [refugees] on demand.**’ This meant that refugees were subject to detention in French camps until their deportation to extermination camps elsewhere in Europe.

ARMISTICE VIOLATED. By liberally issuing visas to refugees, Harry Bingham plainly contravened ARTICLE 19 of this armistice “law.” Instead of permitting their surrender to detention camps, which would lead to their certain death in extermination camps, he provided a means of escape from Europe.

TRANSFERRED FROM MARSEILLES. In May 1941, the State Department demoted Bingham from his supervisory position in the visa section, abruptly transferred him to Lisbon, Portugal, and then assigned him to Buenos Aires, Argentina (where I was born), far from the European theatre.

FRY LAMENTS. When Varian Fry learned that Bingham was packing his things to leave Marseilles, he wrote in his May 1941 diary:

[Harry Bingham's] going will be a great loss to the refugees, and may seriously cripple our work....

Years later, Fry presented Harry with his book *Surrender on Demand*, bearing the hand-written inscription: "To my partner in the 'crime' of saving human lives."

While in Argentina, Harry continued to alert superiors of the spread of fascism in the Southern Hemisphere. He started to get "uppity" again, by pushing proposals for US military intervention in South America to catch Nazis trying to escape from Europe. His proposals so antagonized superiors that, coupled with what Harry had done in Marseilles, it made him a pariah within the State Department and they wouldn't promote him. He appeared to be a loose cannon. But he had sealed his fate. He continued to be passed over for promotions, and unhappily resigned from the Foreign Service in 1945. He brought his family to his inherited farmhouse in Salem, Connecticut, where he remained until he died peacefully in 1988.

Like other righteous diplomats, my father brought his WWII secrets to the grave.

First inkling 1993. The first inkling I had that he was considered a Holocaust rescuer by anyone outside the family was in 1993, when the US Holocaust Memorial Museum invited my parents to attend a huge celebration of WWII rescuers in the amphitheater of the Arlington National Cemetery.

My father was no longer alive and his wife Rose was too frail to make the trip. So my mother asked my sister, Abigail, and I to use their tickets to the grand tribute to Rescue Units of the Allied Armed Forces and diplomatic rescuers from around the world.

Three years later, in 1996, Varian Fry curators at the US Holocaust Museum, who knew of Harry's story, persuaded Eric Saul, director of the Visas for Life program at the Simon Wiesenthal Center, to include Hiram Bingham IV in the world-traveling exhibit of WWII righteous diplomats. I later learned that my mother, Rose, and brother Thomas also had sent some of Harry's Marseilles documents and photos to the museum in 1991, which are posted on its website.

EMOTIONAL TOUR OF ISRAEL 1998. As a consequence of the museum's recommendation, Harry was featured with ten other righteous diplomats at the Yad Vashem Museum in Jerusalem during Israel's 50th Anniversary celebrations in

April 1998. I was privileged to attend with two brothers, David and William, at the invitation of the Simon Wiesenthal Center.

Also attending were Mrs. Sugihara, widow of famous Japanese rescuer Chiune Sugihara, Raoul Wallenberg's niece, Louise, and the wonderful children of the ten other featured diplomats. Harry Bingham was the only American displayed at the exhibit.

During our tour of Israel, we heard many moving stories from Holocaust survivors who expressed profound gratitude for the life-saving activities of the WWII diplomats. We also attended the unveiling of postage stamps in Jerusalem, which depicted four of the diplomats, and we planted pine trees in the eleven diplomats' memory during a televised ceremony in the beautiful Sugihara Forest overlooking Jerusalem. Harry's tree and spirit remain there today.

POSTAL SERVICE'S POLITE RESPONSES. This emotional tour inspired me to launch the stamp drive for my father in December 1998. Each year the U.S. postal service politely wrote me that the stamp proposal "remains under consideration." Then, one year, I received a letter stating that the proposal "remains under SERIOUS consideration."

STATE DEPARTMENT PAYS TRIBUTE. The stamp drive also caught the attention of the Secretary of State, Colin Powell, who, in June 2002, invited Harry's children to the State Department for a "Constructive Dissent" award ceremony. In his speech before a number of foreign service officers, Powell stated that Harry Bingham placed his "life and career on the line" doing the right thing.

This was a welcome first-time government tribute to Harry, 14 years after his death, and 60 years after his humanitarian deeds.

REWARDING STAMP CAMPAIGN. The stamp campaign has been very rewarding not just because of the broad bipartisan support received, including the endorsement of 40 US Representatives and 40 US Senators, but also because it has generated beautiful emails from Harry's survivors, copies of whose visas I have posted with their permission.

(I have published some in *COURAGEOUS DISSENT* and on my website for Hiram Bingham IV).

SON OF SURVIVOR JACQUES BODNER. In June 2008, Lawrence Bodner wrote that his father Jacques, at age 17, escaped with Harry's help:

“Dear Mr. Bingham:

...

Your father issued my dad's visa [on] February 27, 1940.... My father sailed on March 30, 1940 on the S.S. Champlain.

The day of the sailing the police brought my father to your dad's office in leg irons, handcuffs and in prison garb. My dad did not have a shower in more than three weeks. Your father was enraged.

Your dad ordered the police to remove the leg irons and handcuffs and then ordered his secretary to take my father for a bath and to buy him new clothes... before your dad could take him to the ship.

Your father knew what my dad had gone through. My dad was just 17 years old when he was arrested and imprisoned in the concentration camp. I thought that I should share my dad's story with you....

Since your father was responsible for the survival of my father and in turn was indirectly responsible for the creation of me, my two brothers, my two sisters, ten grandchildren, and four great grandchildren, I would like to honor your father by sending you a copy of my book.... Respectfully,
Lawrence Bodner.” [Email to Robert Kim Bingham, June 29, 2008.]

SURVIVOR ELLY SHERMAN. In October 2005, Elly Sherman, an 85 year old California lady, sent me the following emotional email:

“Of the three [in] my family whom [your father] saved... I am the last one alive, and I write this with trembling fingers and many a tear.... Without him we would not have been able to avoid the concentration camp to which we were assigned two days later....

[Your father] provided us with [documents] because we no longer held citizenship in any country, and therefore had no papers.... We cannot honor him enough.” [Elly Sherman.]

She also sent copies of her family visas which my father had signed in 1941 when she was 15. I was thrilled to recognize his signatures and posted these documents on the website.

Please visit my website under the header "SURVIVORS' QUOTES" for a number of testimonies received since the unveiling of the stamp.

SURVIVOR MICHAEL SHINAGEL, HARVARD DEAN: In a happy coincidence in October 2009, a Harvard Dean, who was teaching English literature to my daughter Alexandra, took her aside after class one day, and they tearfully discovered that her grandfather had saved his immediate family in the spring of 1941.

He wrote me saying: "My family is indebted to your father for saving our lives."
[Dean Michael Shinagel email to Robert K. Bingham October 6, 2009.]

CONCLUSION. I hope, by bringing out the story of Hiram Bingham IV and the other righteous diplomats, we as a society may further the cause of making this world a more humane and loving place. Having this hope is what my father's life is all about.

NOTE: Robert Kim Bingham, Sr. is author of the book **COURAGEOUS DISSENT: *How Harry Bingham Defied His Government to Save Lives*** (Second Edition 2009).

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