

From Machu Picchu

Dean Michael Shinagel reflects on a chance meeting

IN THE FALL TERM OF 2009, I TAUGHT A GRADUATE SEMINAR AT THE Extension School titled *Classic English Fictions Reconsidered*, a close reading and critical analysis of major novels ranging from Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* to Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*. Among the students in the seminar was a woman named Alexandra Bingham Mezzina, and after our second meeting I asked her if by chance she was related to Hiram Bingham, the discoverer of Machu Picchu in Peru. She smiled broadly and reported that she was his great-granddaughter. I told her that the Bingham family had played a critical role in the lives of my immediate family because her grandfather, Hiram Bingham IV, as a State Department official in Marseilles in 1941, signed the visas for my father, mother, brother, and me to emigrate to the United States.

When my wife and I visited Machu Picchu a number of years ago, I recalled that the Yale professor who discovered this remarkable sight in 1911 was the father of the man who signed my family's visas and saved our lives from the Nazis in 1941, some 30 years after the discovery of Machu Picchu. It was a memorable moment for me to appreciate how seemingly disparate events have a deeper connection and meaning in our lives.

My graduate student, Alexandra, relayed this information to her father, Robert Kim Bingham, in Connecticut and the following week she presented me with an inscribed copy of her father's book titled *Courageous Dissent*, a moving account of his father's career in the US State Department and how he went counter to official policy by issuing visas to Jews and others fleeing Nazi Europe, including the artist Marc Chagall and the brother of the author Thomas Mann.

For his disobedience, Bingham was sent by the State Department to Buenos Aires, Argentina, where he expressed concern over Nazis coming to Argentina late in the war. But he was repeatedly overlooked for promotion and in 1945 returned with his family to Connecticut. In time he was eventually recognized by the State Department for his "courageous dissent" by Secretary of State Colin Powell, and the Postal Service issued a Hiram Bingham IV stamp in his honor.

I wrote my student's father, Robert Kim Bingham, to thank him for the book and to express my highest esteem for his father. I enclosed a short autobiographical article I wrote for *The Hidden Child* newsletter in 2008 titled "Pilgrimage to Post-War Vienna," describing how my family left Vienna in 1938 and survived the Holocaust, thanks to the visas signed by Hiram Bingham IV in 1941, with our safe arrival in New York in June of 1941.



to Harvard Extension School

that brought back memories of a wartime childhood

Mr. Bingham wrote to thank me for my memoir and expressed his gratification that his father was so instrumental in saving our lives. He quoted my memoir in a talk he gave to the Rotary Club in Connecticut on his father's achievements during World War II, and with my permission he added the memoir to his website dedicated to his father.

A twist in this story came from my cousin Flora, who survived the Holocaust in France by being cared for by nuns in a convent until the end of the war, when she eventually came to the United States and received a PhD from New York University in psychology. She has devoted her career in large part to studying survivors of the Holocaust. I sent her my memoir and she wrote me back:

I met Hiram Bingham at Oxford years ago when I gave a talk about my researches on the Holocaust and he was there and I embraced him and I have somewhere a photo with him. A wonderful, very modest man, with a tremendous amount of courage. I feel very honored that I met him and spoke with him.

So there was yet another connection with Hiram Bingham IV by my family.

As if there weren't enough coincidences connected with the story of Hiram Bingham IV, I learned recently from my neighbor in Cambridge, Anne Warner, that she was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in March 1944 while her father, Gerald Warner, was second secretary of the US Embassy. Anne inherited her father's scrapbooks of photos and newspaper clippings from his diplomatic career, and she found a clipping from the *Buenos Aires Herald* from the fall of 1945 with a photo of Hiram Bingham IV, "the Second Secretary and Consul at the United States Embassy . . . with his wife and seven children on the gangway of the Panagra plane prior to their departure for the United States." This photo was historic, because it marked Bingham's retirement from the State Department. He retired to the family home in Connecticut and added five more children to the seven who left Argentina with him and his wife.

The estimable Bingham family tradition lives on at the Harvard Extension School through Alexandra Bingham Mezzina, who did excellent work in my graduate English seminar and is now a Master of Liberal Arts candidate preparing for a promising teaching career. ♥

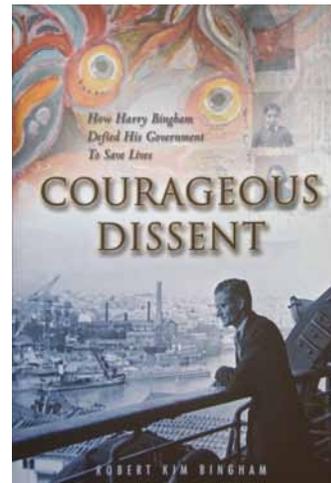


PHOTO OF MACHU PICCHU BY ELIZABETH MARR