

This Day in History... July 17, 1903

Happy Birthday, Hiram Bingham IV

American diplomat Hiram Bingham IV was born on July 17, 1903, in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Bingham came from a long line of distinguished men. His great-grandfather and grandfather were some of the first Protestant missionaries in Hawaii. His father had been the governor of Connecticut, a US senator, and was one of the first Americans to explore the Inca ruins at Machu Picchu. And his mother was an heiress of the famed Tiffany and Co.

Bingham was one of seven sons and he attended the Groton School and later Yale, from which he graduated in 1925. He went on to serve as a civilian secretary at a US consulate in Japan. While there he worked as a teacher part time. After spending time in India and Egypt, he returned to the US and went to Harvard to earn a law degree. Bingham then placed third in his class on the foreign service exam, being admitted to the US Foreign Service.

Bingham began his career in China, where he saw communism begin to take over the country. He later served in Poland and England. In 1939, Bingham was transferred to the US Consulate in Marseilles, France. The following year, Germany invaded the country and set up a Nazi-friendly government. The thousands of refugees who had fled to France in previous years were forced into internment camps.



Bingham helped more than 2,500 refugees escape during World War II.

At this time, the US State Department discouraged its diplomats from granting visas to the refugees. After touring the camps and observing the poor conditions of the occupants, Bingham decided to defy orders and began helping refugees escape France. He issued Nansen passports, travel documents for refugees who could not get passports from their home country. Word spread of the vice consul's efforts. Martha Sharp, an American rescue worker, wrote this about Bingham: "I am proud that our government is represented in its Foreign Services by a man of your quality... I believe that such humane and cooperative handling of individuals is what we need most coupled with intelligence and good breeding."

Unfortunately, the US State Department did not view Bingham's actions in the same positive light. In 1941, he was moved to South America. While stationed in Argentina, he helped find Nazi criminals that had escaped to the country. Bingham resigned from the Foreign Service in 1945.

The former diplomat moved to a farm in Connecticut to raise his family. His wife and 11 children "never knew why his career had soured," according to his youngest son. After his death on January 12, 1988, the story was revealed when the family found a dusty bundle hidden in a closet. The letters, documents, and photographs told the story of Bingham's rescue of more than 2,500 Jews in ten short months.

Since that time, the United Nations and the State of Israel have honored Hiram Bingham IV. His children accepted the Constructive Dissent award on his behalf in 2002. The family donated the documents to the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, and some of them were part of a traveling exhibit called Visas for Life: The Righteous and Honorable Diplomats. In 1998, one of Bingham's sons began asking the US Postal Service to issue a stamp in his father's honor. That goal was realized in 2006 when Bingham was featured as part of the Distinguished American Diplomats Series.



From the American Diplomats issue

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