

Genealogists Discover Identity of Enigmatic Upper East Side Collector

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William M.V. Kingsland, a bon vivant boulevardier of the Upper East Side who died last March, indefatigably researched the genealogies of countless prominent New Yorkers. One of his projects was finding the connections between purchasers of vaults at New York Marble Cemetery and their living descendants.

Yet none of his many friends and acquaintances knew about Kingsland's early years. Now two genealogists, Leslie Corn and Roger Joslyn, have tracked down his background and discovered that his parents were Jewish refugees from Europe.

Since Kingsland's death, the Federal Bureau of Investigation has also been investigating Kingsland. Artwork found stacked in his apartment after his death turned out to be missing or stolen, including a bust of Giacometti and two paintings from Harvard, one by the famous Colonial portraitist John Singleton Copley.

Mr. Kingsland died intestate. The file in the computer index of the Public Administrator at the New York County Surrogate's Court listed the value of his estate as \$501,000. Works belonging to Kingsland were consigned to Stair Galleries and Christie's by the Public Administrator for the City of New York.

An heir search firm in California, Brandenburger & Davis, which attempts to locate relatives who may have a claim to an estate and takes a cut of their share, became interested in Mr. Kingsland's case, after being contacted by Ms. Corn and Mr. Joslyn, who are independent genealogical researchers. But heir search firms backed off when the FBI became involved and the possibility of settling a claim became more difficult.

But Ms. Corn and Jr. Joslyn soldiered on. "It's one of the occupational hazards to be curious," Ms. Corn said. She scoured directories, birth indices, voter registrations, phone books, reverse directories, and property records. Mr. Joslyn pursued passenger lists. But their efforts were to no avail. "He was the toughest person I've tracked," said Ms. Corn.

Ms. Corn speculated that his parents could have been immigrants. "Was he hiding immigrant ancestors in his fine arts closets?" Ms. Corn wondered. A friend of Kingland's, Joseph Keiffer, recalled his rumpled blue blazer, blue-and-

white striped Oxford shirts, and corduroy pants. “Ivy League circa 1965,” he said.

Ms. Corn found that naturalization records held the key to Kingsland’s identity. His grandparents on his father’s side, Max Kohn and Sara Silberman, were from Czechoslovakia. Kingsland’s father, Robert Kohn, was born in Vienna and immigrated to New York from Genoa in 1938 aboard the S.S. Rex.

Kingsland’s mother, Loretta (née Lea) Seiden, hailed from Bolezwoce, Poland. She lived in Dortmund, Germany, and in 1937 sailed with her parents, Frank Seiden and Toni Scheer, and brother to America from Southampton, U.K., aboard the S.S. Washington.

One of Kingsland’s uncles on his mother’s side designed stores nationwide for the Custom Shop; another was a jeweler on 47th Street. Kingsland’s father worked as a diamond cutter in the 1940s, at a clothing store in New York, and in security at First Nationwide Bank in Miami, where he and his wife retired to an ocean-view condominium. A neighbor in Miami Beach, Bernice Linder, said Kingsland’s parents were very well respected in the building and loved opera. Kingsland could play classical music at sight.

According to his birth certificate, Melvyn Kohn was born in Park East Hospital in April 29, 1943. He graduated Bronx High School of Science in 1959 and enrolled in New York University College of Arts and Sciences at University Heights.

In a motion filed in 1960 to change his name, Kingsland’s parents said of their 17-year-old son: “in order to more successfully pursue his career in the field of literature and languages, which are his chief interests, it would be to his benefit to assume the name of William M. Kingsland, as this name has a more literary sounding and flavor.”

The family was then living at 1420 Grand Concourse in the Bronx. Reached by phone, the attorney who made the motion for Kingsland’s name change, Zoltan

Neumark, recalled a quiet young man who “had an idea he wanted an aristocratic name.” Kingsland would later tell close friends his middle initials stood for “Milliken” and “Vanderbilt.”

Four years earlier, when he was almost 13, a precocious Melvyn Kohn wrote a letter of the New York Times to comment on King Louis XIV’s long coat and ornate wig — and quoted Thackeray. At age 18, Kingsland again wrote to the Times, weighing in on the ownership of the Elgin Marbles.

Ms. Linder said his parents kept to themselves mostly and did not speak much about their son. None of Kingsland’s close friends apparently knew his name had been Kohn. He was someone “could only exist in a large urban landscape,” said the artist James Dowell, who recalled Kingsland’s white painter’s cap. “On numerous walking trips around the Upper East Side, he showed me “where every neighborhood nabob lived.”

Meanwhile, another genealogical chart is being updated. Ms. Corn and Mr. Joslyn, who first met in Tarrytown at a genealogical gathering, are engaged to be married.