

"He who saves one life, saves the entire world."

(Talmud)

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War refugees waiting for the visas in front of Japanese Consulate in Kaunas, summer of 1940.



Chiune Sugihara



Jan Zwartendijk

Who was Chiune Sugihara?

The biography would say that he was born in Japan in January 1900 to his father, a businessman and tax collector, and his mother, a descendant of a samurai family. He was from a large family, but from an early age, he was ready to choose his own path. It happened that he took exams to study medicine at the university – this was his father's will – but he failed

them intentionally since languages were his major admiration. As a result of his defiance, he had to live on his own from the age of 18. His father's heart later melted, and the family was reunited. But for the rest of his life, Sugihara was used to taking care of himself, his family, and most importantly, his decisions.

The young Sugihara chose to study language at Waseda University, starting with English but had a difficult time as he was left without family support. One day, he saw an advertisement from the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) saying that a new group of diplomats would be assembled, he applied, and the reply was positive. He withdrew from Waseda University and became a government-sponsored student of the MOFA. This time, he focused on Russian language studies, which, he was told by someone in the MOFA, was one of the Japanese priorities at the time. He was sent to Charbin, China, and its diverse society was good for having a multicultural experience and language studies, especially when a large group of white Russians (those who supported the Russian monarchy) settled there after the Bolshevik revolution.

This multicultural experience must have had an impact on Sugihara, an open-minded and sensitive person. It so happened that it was in Charbin that Sugihara met his first love and future wife, Klaudia Apolonovna Semionovna, who was a supporter of the Russian monarchy. The couple got married, and by doing so Sugihara took Orthodox baptism, becoming Sergei Pavlovich Sugihara in the Russian Orthodox tradition. Later, Sugihara separated from his first wife, but the ties remained friendly.

Also, he started an active and promising diplomatic career in the Japanese MOFA. He was appointed to the Manchukuo government and started his activity as a diplomat. Thanks to Sugihara's wisdom and perfect Russian language skills, at that time, Japan was able to negotiate a lower price for part of the Manchurian railroad, which was purchased from the Russian side. This effort from Sugihara was not forgotten by the Russian side and had some effect on Sugihara's diplomatic career later on. When the plan to send Sugihara to the Japanese Embassy in Moscow emerged and the message was sent to the Soviet authorities, they replied with only three words: PERSONA NON GRATA.

But before this experience, in 1934, Sugihara resigned from his high position in the Manchukuo government protesting against the Japanese authorities' position and their treatment of the local population, whom they considered to be inferior. By this time, one thing became clear: Chiune Sugihara was acting according to his beliefs and high humanitarian standards. He asked to be transferred to the MOFA in Tokyo, and this was done. By then, Sugihara had already shown himself to be not only a person of solid views and sometimes disobedient, but also as a very qualified observer and analyst with the ability to gather large portions of information in different languages and digest them into clear and readable text. In

fact, his study on the Bolshevik regime in Russia was a must-read for all Japanese embassies working with the Soviets. And this was not Sugihara's personal suggestion, but the decree of the MOFA. Sugihara had analytical talent, but to this, he added hard work, which brought him satisfactory results as well in language studies. Besides his native Japanese, Sugihara spoke Chinese, French, German, English, and Russian.

In 1935 Sugihara married his wife Yukiko Kikuchi, his partner for the rest of his life. The era in which Sugihara lived was a world of growing aggression, invasion, and occupation. His beloved Japan took an active part in these processes in the Far East. But Sugihara, who was valued for his analytical abilities and language skills, was sent to Europe: the place where World War II was about to start.

Years in Europe: Part 1

Sugihara started his diplomatic mission in Europe from Helsinki, the capital of Finland, in 1938. It is clear now that Sugihara was rather ignored by some Japanese staff in the embassies, especially the military attachés, who at that time had rather a combatant position. Thus, the presence of Sugihara sometimes contrasted with the general moods in the embassies.

It is said that World War II broke out unexpectedly, but on the other hand, everyone thought it was only a matter of time. On September 1, 1939, the world stepped into the new, the most destructive phase of its existence. This tragedy affected Sugihara's career in a rather unexpected way. He was transferred to Kaunas, the provisional capital of Lithuania. There he was given the leadership of the Japanese Consulate.

Role of Lithuania

When World War II broke out, Lithuania was still an independent country and declared its neutrality. From today's perspective, we know that it was the beginning of the end. First of all, the world was shocked by the agreement between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union: two radical opponents made a pact. But only the closest circles knew about the secret protocols of the Molotov–Ribbentrop agreement, the protocols of the division of Europe between these two totalitarian aggressors.

In this perspective, Japan – having made agreements with Nazi Germany – felt betrayed since the conflicts between Japan and Russia in the Far East had deep roots, and one of the threats that contributed to the building of the Japanese empire was the Soviet Union. In this

geopolitical context, Kaunas became a very good point for observations, a neutral country with borders with Nazi Germany. In March of 1939, the Nazis occupied a part of Lithuanian territory, the only seaport, Klaipėda (Memel), claiming that this was historical German lands, and when the Molotov Ribbentrop secret protocols came into effect, the Soviets occupied eastern territories of Poland and approached the Lithuanian borders. So, the two totalitarian regimes in Europe could be seen with bare eyes from Lithuania. This all happened when Sugihara was in Lithuania. His government transferred him to Kaunas and officially reported that he would act as Japanese vice-consul, but his true mission was gathering information.

Why the Jews?

The anti-Semitic position of the Nazis is largely known, but after the Soviet Union attacked Poland on September 17, 1939, the Jewish population was largely targeted by the Soviets as well. Although their hatred was not specifically directed against Jews, the Soviets hated religious people, as well as people who shared national identity, and among the Jewish population, there were large numbers of religious and Zionist people. One of the first targets during the Soviet occupation in Poland were Synagogues and yeshivas. They were massively closed, and rabbis were arrested and persecuted. These were the main reasons why Jews left Nazi and Soviet-occupied Polish territories and settled in large numbers in Lithuania.

In the refugees' eyes, Lithuania was a safe haven and Jews had no restrictions there until the Soviet occupation of Lithuania started in June 1940. Understanding that under the Soviet regime, Jews would not be able to live their former lives, they started to search for possible destinations. The most desired were the United States and Palestine, but these had rather strict immigration quotas, and foreign embassies were rather indifferent to the demands of the refugees. In this context, Sugihara's decision to issue Japanese transit visas was exceptional.

Combination of the escape plan

Until the Nazis advanced in Western Europe in the spring of 1940 and Mussolini moved closer to Hitler, European Jews used Italian ports to leave Europe, but in the summer of 1940, it became rather complicated. The remaining possibility to reach Western countries was to go east. The Soviets would allow the refugees to cross their territory on the Trans-Siberian Railroad, expecting huge revenues from ticket sales. But where to go?

At that time, Chiune Sugihara and his family had spent 10 months in Lithuania, and the

third son Haruki had just been born in May 1940 in Kaunas. Sugihara had already analyzed the situation in the region, and he had likely heard that Jews were being hunted by Nazis and discriminated against by the Soviets. Moreover, he was the eyewitness of refugees flowing into Lithuania from Poland. Of course, he knew about the Trans-Siberian Railroad and the connection to the Far East via Japan, which had been operating since the late 19th century.

Jewish refugees in Lithuania were rather diverse but unified by religion, Zionism, or both. So, in this difficult situation, they started to search for all possible escape routes together. Jews in the US and other places knew about the strict measures taken by the Soviets against religious Jews, the leaders of yeshivas and the rabbis. The clock was ticking, and something needed to be done.

Among the refugees was one active young man, a lawyer from Warsaw, Zorah Warhaftig. He and his pregnant wife had come to Lithuania on foot. They were staying in Vilnius, but when they understood that decisions were still made in Kaunas, they moved there. All foreign legations were in Kaunas, and without the help of the foreign diplomats, escape was hardly possible. But the diplomats in Kaunas were rather passive, and a lot of visits and conversations gave no results.

According to the account of Warhaftig, he visited all major embassies in Kaunas and got no practical result. Together with his colleagues, he started to analyze the map, looking for any possibilities, and the Far East caught his attention. He organized a representative group of Jewish people and met with Sugihara. To his surprise, this time, the reply was not, "There's nothing I can do," or "I must get instructions," etc. Mr. Sugihara promised to think about it and told them to come back later.

At the other end of this operation, the Dutch honorary consul in Lithuania Jan Zwartendijk was instructed by his boss in Riga, Ambassador LPJ de Decker, to issue final destination visas to those people who have Dutch citizenship. In fact, de Decker himself made the first inscription in the Dutch passport mailed to him from Lithuania to Riga.

De Decker indicated that a separate visa is not required to enter Curacao, Suriname, and other Dutch colonies in the Caribbean. And he strategically "forgot" the last sentence of the formula—acceptance of the new arrivals is decided by the governor of the island. So, at a time of restricted visas and quotas, this opened a window of opportunity. Since a large number of Dutch citizens in Lithuania were religious Jews – Telšiai and other Yeshivas students – it was rather easy to spread the word. Refugees communicated with fellow Dutch who already had Curacao visas. The remaining question was how to reach the destination, but Warhaftig was optimistic about Sugihara's decision to issue Japanese transit visas.

It is said that Sugihara and Zwartendijk never met in person and only spoke on the phone a few times. But in this situation, they probably understood without words that their

cooperation could be fruitful, but also dangerous for them and their family members. Nevertheless, they took the risk.

Both diplomats were let out from the Soviet Lithuania in late August and early September 1940. Together, they issued over 2000 visas for the Jewish refugees. Sugihara consulted Tokyo by telegram on what to do with the large number of visa applicants, but the reply was delayed, and Sugihara took his own initiative and began issuing visas en masse. As for Zwartendijk, he ignored de Decker's recommendations to issue Curacao visas only to Dutch citizens – he issued visas to all applicants. But for the refugees, getting the visas was just the beginning of a long journey.

Flight

Even with the Sugihara-Zwartendijk visas, refugees still had to get the permission of NKVD (Soviet secret police agency) to leave the Soviet Union, purchase the Trans-Siberian Railroad ticket at the Intourist (Soviet travelling agency), spend 14 days on the train, and then hope that the ferry from Tsuruga, Japan would come to Vladivostok to pick them up.

On this route, various aids and people were also important. Here, the help from the American Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) might be mentioned. Originally, the JDC initiative started in 1914 as a relief to the Jews in Palestine, but in this story, the JDC was instrumental in collecting money for Intourist services, i.e., purchasing tickets for the Trans-Siberian Railroad.

So, getting the Sugihara-Zwartendijk visas was limited to July-August 1940, but after that, there were long months of waiting to get the money to buy tickets for the Trans-Siberian Railroad. And the Soviets were quite repressive here—they ordered all the refugees to apply for Soviet citizenship by December of 1940, otherwise the disobedient would be exiled to Siberia.

Years in Europe: Part 2

Sugihara issued a few dozen visas in Prague in 1941, where he was appointed after his stay in Berlin. When the Soviets closed all embassies in Lithuania, Sugihara came to Berlin from Kaunas, as Nazi Berlin housed the main Japanese embassy in Europe, and it coordinated other diplomatic missions. From Berlin, Sugihara was sent to Prague, later to Königsberg (now Kaliningrad), and Bucharest was his final destination, where he served his country's interests

until the Soviets occupied Romania and Sugihara with his family was interned for long months. He worked for the Soviets as a translator but eventually was released and returned to Japan in 1947.

Sugihara's diplomatic career came to an end in 1947 – he left the Japanese MOFA and began to install himself and his family in a new phase of life.

Recognition and importance

Sugihara did not seek any recognition of what he had done in Kaunas and later in Prague where he issued several dozen Japanese transit visas. In fact, it was the survivors who received Sugihara's visas who began searching for their savior after the war. First was Joshua Nishri who was a diplomat himself. In 1968, while working in the Israel Embassy in Tokyo as an economic attaché, Nishri started to search for Sugihara. Eventually, he succeeded. During the meeting, Nishri explained and reminded Sugihara that if it were not for his visas in Kaunas, he would not have survived. It was a moving meeting and a starting point for Sugihara survivors emerging from all over the world.

Among the Jews rescued by Sugihara and Zwartendijk, there were many who were deeply religious – rabbis and students of different yeshivas in today's Poland, Belarus, and Lithuania. Being strictly observant, yeshivas students and religious Jews live in rather closed communities, using only Jewish languages, so quite a lot of testimonies and memoirs are presented in Yiddish or Hebrew. But despite this fact, recognition for Sugihara began to develop.

In 1968, the same year that Nishri found Sugihara, the youngest son of Sugihara, Nobuki, received a scholarship from the Israeli government to study at a Hebrew university in Jerusalem. With this, more survivors remembered Sugihara, hearing his name. In the meantime, Zwartendijk was often referred to as Curacao Angel or Mr. Philips Radio.

In the Jewish tradition, the ultimate value is life, and observant Jews are allowed to ignore religious commitments if they pose a threat to their lives. Tragically, perhaps more yeshiva communities could have been saved if they had followed this tradition. In order to leave the Soviet Union, they had to split into smaller groups, and quite often, yeshivas' heads decided not to do so. They decided to stay together, protect and strengthen each other in the hostile milieu. Yeshiva's leaders, who were invited to come to a safe place, as the US for example, did not accept the invitations saying that they have no moral right to leave their pupils, or to split them into smaller groups and travel only with one of them. The big exception here is Mirer Yeshiva from today's Belarussian town Mir. They travelled in split groups and reunited in

Japan and Shanghai.

Example of the Mirer Yeshiva shows that the courageous acts of Sugihara and Zwartendijk were the crucial factors in saving Jewish religion, philosophy and education traditions that had flourished in Europe for at least a few hundred years. Besides this success story, separate groups or individuals reached Japan as well. These Sugihara-Zwartendijk survivors became religious and community leaders all over the worldwide Jewish diaspora. Among these refugees was Zorah Wahrhaftig. When he noticed that NKVD had their eyes on him in Kaunas, he speeded up his departure with a Sugihara visa, reached Japan, later went on the US, and eventually settled in Israel.

Warhaftig met with Sugihara in 1968 when he served as the Religious Affairs Minister of Israel. At this point, Sugihara was asked how he might be thanked to which he replied that he does not need anything. But Yad Vashem in Jerusalem already was announcing Righteous Gentiles Among the Nations, a special title for people who saved the Jewish people from the Holocaust. The procedure is strict and time-consuming, but Sugihara was granted the title in 1984. The ceremony took place in the Israeli embassy in Tokyo since Sugihara was too ill to travel long distances. Sugihara not only was given a diploma and medal but a tree at Yad Vashem Park was planted to honor him. He passed away in 1986. Without a doubt, this is the highest recognition from the side of the state of Israel. But Sugihara continues to be recognized worldwide in Jewish communities and non-Jewish milieus to this day.

For example, several Sugihara Museums are operating across the globe, and among them is the Sugihara House Museum in Kaunas, established and supported by Sugihara Diplomats for Life Foundation as civic initiative in 1999, without state or municipality support, and is the very place where visas for life were issued by Japanese vice-consul Chiune Sugihara.

The Conservative synagogue Temple Emeth, in Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts, US, built a "Sugihara Memorial Garden" and holds an Annual Sugihara Memorial Concert.

In 2002, a memorial statue of Chiune Sugihara by Ramon G. Velazco titled "Chiune Sugihara Memorial, Hero of the Holocaust" was installed in the Little Tokyo neighborhood of Los Angeles, California, US. In June 2016, a street in Netanya, Israel, was named for Sugihara. Since October 2021, there has been a Chiune Sugihara Square in Jerusalem as well as a Garden named for him in the Kiryat Hayovel neighborhood of the city.

These are not the only initiatives to commemorate the deeds of Chiune Sugihara. They will continue in the future. For the Jewish world, Sugihara is one of the Righteous Among the Nations, a respectable figure, but at the same time it just so happened that among the Sugihara-Zwartendijk survivors, there was a large group of Jewish religious, educated people who transmitted European Jewish traditions to places all over the world in such a way as to strengthen or create new cultural and spiritual centers of Jewish life based on traditions and

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wisdom handed down from generation to generation for centuries.

And speaking of generations, here it is worth repeating Talmudic wisdom: "He who saves one life, saves the entire world." Today, thanks to Sugihara, the people he saved have third, and fourth-generation descendants. And the lifeline goes on.