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Dedicated to Chiune Sugihara, Rescuer



THE SUGIHARA STORY

WHO WAS CHIUNE SUGIHARA?

For the last half century people have asked, 'Who was Chiune Sugihara?' They have also asked, 'Why did he risk his career, his family fortune, and the lives of his family to issue visas to Jewish refugees in Lithuania?' These are not easy questions to answer, and there may be no single set of answers that will satisfy our curiosity or inquiry.

Chiune (Sempo) Sugihara always did things his own way. He was born on January 1, 1900. He graduated from high school with top marks and his father insisted that he become a medical doctor. But Chiune's dream was to study literature and live abroad. Sugihara attended Tokyo's prestigious Waseda University to study English. He paid for his own education with part-time work as a longshoreman and tutor.

One day he saw an item in the classified ads. The Foreign Ministry was seeking people who wished to study abroad and might be interested in a diplomatic career. He passed the difficult entrance exam and was sent to the Japanese language institute in Harbin, China. He studied Russian and graduated with honors. He also converted to Greek Orthodox Christianity. While in Harbin he met and married a Caucasian woman. They were later divorced. The cosmopolitan nature of Harbin, China opened his eyes to how diverse and interesting the world was.

He then served with the Japanese controlled government in Manchuria, in northeastern China. He was later promoted to Vice Minister of the Foreign Affairs Department. He was soon in line to be the Minister of Foreign Affairs in Manchuria.

While in Manchuria he negotiated the purchase of the Russian-owned Manchurian railroad system by the Japanese. This saved the Japanese government millions of dollars, and infuriated the Russians.

Sugihara was disturbed by his government's policy and the cruel treatment of the Chinese by the Japanese government. He resigned his post in protest in 1934.

In 1938 Sugihara was posted to the Japanese diplomatic office in Helsinki, Finland. With World War II looming on the horizon, the Japanese government sent Sugihara to Lithuania to open a one-man consulate in 1939. There he would report on Soviet and German war plans. Six months later, war broke out and the Soviet Union annexed Lithuania. The Soviets ordered all consulates to be closed. It was in this context that Sugihara was confronted with the requests of thousands of Polish Jews fleeing German-occupied Poland.

SUGIHARA, THE MAN

Sugihara's personal history and temperament may contain the key to why he defied his government's orders and issued the visas. Sugihara favored his mother's personality. He thought of himself as kind and nurturing and artistic. He was interested in foreign ideas, religion, philosophy and language. He wanted to travel the world and see everything there was, and experience the world. He had a strong sense of the value of all human life. His language skills show that he was always interested in learning more about other peoples.

Sugihara was a humble and understated man. He was self-sacrificing, self-effacing and had a very good sense of humor. Yukiko, his wife, said he found it very difficult to discipline the children when they misbehaved. He never lost his temper.

Sugihara was also raised in the strict Japanese code of ethics of a turn-of-the-century samurai family. The cardinal virtues of this society were oya koko (love of the family), kodomo no tamane (for the sake of the children), having gidi and on (duty and responsibility, or obligation to repay a debt), gaman (withholding of emotions on the surface), gambate (internal strength and resourcefulness), and haji no kakate (don't bring shame on the family). These virtues were strongly inculcated by Chiune's middle-class rural samurai family.

It took enormous courage for Sugihara to defy the order of his father to become a doctor, and instead follow his own academic path. It took courage to leave Japan and study overseas. It took a very modern liberal Japanese man to marry a Caucasian woman

and convert to Christianity. It took even more courage to openly oppose the Japanese military policies of expansion in the 1930s.

Thus Sempo Sugihara was no ordinary Japanese man and may have been no ordinary man. At the time that he and his wife Yukiko thought of the plight of the Jewish refugees, he was haunted by the words of an old samurai maxim: "Even a hunter cannot kill a bird which flies to him for refuge."

Forty-five years after he signed the visas, Chiune was asked why he did it. He liked to give two reasons: "They were human beings and they needed help," he said. "I'm glad I found the strength to make the decision to give it to them." Sugihara was a religious man and believed in a universal god of all people. He was fond of saying, "I may have to disobey my government, but if I don't I would be disobeying God."

SUGIHARA'S CHOICE

Time began to run out for the refugees as Hitler tightened the net around Eastern Europe. The refugees came upon an idea which they presented to Sugihara. They discovered that the two Dutch colonial islands, Curacao and Surinam, situated in the Caribbean, did not require formal entrance visas, and the Dutch consul informed them that he would be willing to stamp their passports with a Dutch visa to that destination. Furthermore, the Dutch consul had received permission from his superior in Riga to issue such visas and he was willing to issue these visas to anyone who was willing to pay a fee.

To get to these two islands, one needed to pass through the Soviet Union. The Soviet consul, who was sympathetic to the plight of the refugees, agreed to let them pass on one condition: that in addition to the Dutch visa, they would also obtain a transit visa from the Japanese as they would have to pass through Japan on their way to Curacao or Surinam.

Sugihara had a difficult decision to make. He was a man who was brought up in the strict and traditional discipline of the Japanese. He was a career diplomat, who suddenly had to make a very difficult choice. On one hand, he was bound by the traditional obedience he had been taught all his life. On the other hand, he was a samurai who had been told to help those who were in need. He knew that if he defied the orders of his superiors, he would be fired and disgraced, and would probably never work for the Japanese government again. This would result in extreme financial hardship for his family in the future.

Chiune and his wife Yukiko Sugihara even feared for their lives in making this decision. They agreed that they had no choice in the matter. Mr. Sugihara said, "I may have to disobey my government, but if I don't, I would be disobeying God." Mr. Sugihara was a

humble man and, when asked why he did it, he often replied: "I saw people in distress, and I was able to help them, so why shouldn't I?" Mrs. Sugihara remembered that "the refugee's eyes were so intense and desperate- especially the women and children. There were hundreds of people standing outside." Fifty-four years after their decision, Mrs. Sugihara said: "human life is very important, and being virtuous in life is important as well." This was a decision that would ultimately save the second largest number of Jews in World War II. They chose to help the thousands who thronged the gates of his consulate in Kaunas.

The choice faced by the Sugiharas was a moral dilemma that thousands of consuls all over the world faced every day. Few lost sleep in shutting the doors in Jewish faces. These consuls went strictly by the book, and in many cases, were even stricter in issuing visas than their governments required. Countless thousands could have been saved if other consuls had acted more like Sugihara. If there had been 2,000 consuls like Chiune Sugihara, a million Jewish children could have been saved from the ovens of Auschwitz.

VISAS FOR LIFE

For 29 days, from July 31 to August 28, 1940, Mr. and Mrs. Sugihara unflinchingly sat for endless hours signing visas with their own hands. Hour after hour, day after day, during three weeks, they wrote visas. They wrote over 300 visas a day, which would normally be more than one month's work for the consul. Yukiko also helped him register these visas. At the end of the day, she would massage his fatigued hands. He did not even stop to eat. His wife supplied him with sandwiches. Sugihara chose not to lose a minute because people were standing in line in front of his consulate day and night for these visas. When some began climbing the fence to get in on the compound, he came out and calmed them down. He promised them that as long as there was a single person left, he would not abandon them.

After receiving their visas, the refugees lost no time in getting on the train that took them to Moscow, and by the trans-Siberian railroad to Vladivostok. From there, most of them continued to Kobe, Japan. They were allowed to stay in Kobe for several months. They were then sent to Shanghai, China. All of the Polish Jews who were issued visas survived in safety, under the protection of the Japanese government in Shanghai. They survived, thanks to the humanity and courage of Chiune and Yukiko Sugihara. The visas they issued turned out to be passes to the world of the living. When Sugihara had to leave Kaunas for his next post in Berlin, he handed over the visa stamp to a refugee, and many more Jews were granted life.

In 1945, the Japanese government unceremoniously dismissed Chiune Sugihara from the diplomatic service. His career as a diplomat was shattered. He had to start his life over. Sugihara was without a steady job for over a year. Once a rising star in the Japanese foreign service, Chiune Sugihara worked as a part time translator and interpreter. For the last two decades of his life, he worked as a manager for an export



company with business in Moscow. This was his fate because he dared to save thousands of human beings from certain death.

Today, 50 years after the event, there may be 40,000 or more people who owe their lives to Chiune and Yukiko Sugihara. Two generations have come after the Sugihara survivors, and they owe their lives to the Sugiharas. All the survivors call him their savior, some consider him a holy man, and some think he was a saint. Yukiko Sugihara recalled that every time she and her husband had met or heard of people they had saved, they felt great satisfaction and happiness. They had no regrets.

After the war, Mr. Sugihara never mentioned or spoke to anyone about his extraordinary deeds. It was not until 1969 that Sugihara was found by a man whom he had helped to save. Soon, many others whom he had saved came forward and testified to the Yad Vashem (Holocaust Memorial) in Israel about his life-saving deeds. The Sugihara survivors sent in hundreds of testimonies on behalf of their savior. After gathering the testimonies from all over the world, the committee at the Yad Vashem realized the enormity of this man's self-sacrifice in saving Jews. Before his death, he received Israel's highest honor. In 1985, he was recognized as "Righteous Among the Nations" by the Yad Vashem Martyrs Remembrance Authority in Jerusalem. He was too ill to travel; his wife and son received the honor on his behalf. Further, a tree was planted in his name, and a park in Jerusalem was named in his honor.

He said that he was very happy with the honors. "I think that my decision was humanely correct."

The above text was written by Eric Saul

VISAS FOR LIFE

Visas for Life: The Story of Chiune and Yukiko Sugihara and the Rescue of Thousands of Jews

JAPANESE DIPLOMAT HONORED FOR 3rd LARGEST HOLOCAUST RESCUE

During World War II, the true nature of mankind was tested. A Japanese man named Chiune Sugihara set the curve with an act of altruism and courage, by helping thousands of Jewish strangers escape from the Nazis. His remarkable story is the subject of a photographic exhibit, [Visas for Life -- The Story of Chiune and Yukiko Sugihara and the Rescue of Thousands of Jews](#), organized by the Visas for Life Foundation, San Francisco.

The photos tell the compelling story of Sugihara, a rising star in Japanese diplomacy who, with his wife Yukiko, risked their lives and the lives of their children by issuing unauthorized Japanese transit visas to Jewish refugees from Poland fleeing the Nazis. In the span of 28 days and with throngs of desperate people waiting outside his consulate window he issued more than 2,139 visas. Each visa may have been used by an entire family.

Sugihara's efforts resulted in the rescue of an estimated 6 - 12,000 Jews, the second largest rescue after that of Raoul Wallenberg, the Swedish envoy who saved 100,000 Hungarian Jews; and followed by the rescue De Sousa Mendes, the Portuguese Consul General in Bordeaux, France, who saved between 30,000 - 50,000 Jews. Together, these three men were responsible for saving approximately 150,000 persons, or 15% of all Jews who were rescued during the Holocaust.

"The story of men like Sugihara offsets the darkness of the Holocaust by lighting a candle of justice," says Eric Saul, exhibit curator for the Visas for Life Foundation. "We are trying to inspire people to act as courageously and with the same conscience as Sugihara, whether in Rwanda or Bosnia,



Chiune and Yukiko Sugihara in front of a park entrance. Printed in German and Lithuanian, the sign behind reads "Jews not allowed."



Chiune (Sempo) Sugihara, the Japanese consular official serving in Lithuania, saved one of the largest number of Jews in the Holocaust.



Jewish refugees from Poland outside the gates of the Japanese Consular Office, Kaunas (Kovno), Lithuania, July 1940. (Photo by Setusuko Kikuchi.)

or wherever there is injustice. Our hope is that the children who see this story, who one day might become diplomats or presidents -- or simply find themselves in a position to help -- will be inspired by this exhibit."