

Chiune Sugihara Japan (1900-1986)

In 1940 Chiune Sugihara had to make the most important decision of his lifetime. He had to decide “Yes, I will do it” or “No, I can’t.” If he decided “yes,” he might lose his job, his career could be ruined, and his family might suffer; but he could save the lives of thousands of people. If he decided “no,” most or all of these people would die.

Of course he discussed the decision with his wife, Yukiko. They feared for their lives and those of their children, but in the end, they decided “yes.”



Chiune Sugihara
(Wikipedia, Chiune Sugihara)

What The Sugiharas Did

Chiune Sugihara was in Lithuania when this happened. The Japanese government had sent him in 1938 to open a one-man consulate. Just after his arrival in 1939, war broke out in Europe. Hitler invaded Poland, and went on to invade other countries in Europe. One of Sugihara’s duties as consulate was to report on German and Soviet troop movements. By 1940 the Nazis had invaded all of Western Europe except Britain, and started moving east toward Lithuania. Everywhere the Germans went, they did terrible things to the Jews, so the Lithuanian Jews were anxious to leave.

Instead of helping Jewish refugees, the rest of the world, with few exceptions, refused to allow escaping Jews to immigrate to their countries. One of those exceptions was Holland. The Dutch consul in Lithuania agreed to issue entrance permits to two islands then controlled by Holland—Curacao and Dutch Guiana (now known as Surinam). To

“Even a hunter cannot kill a bird which flies to him for refuge”.

-- **Chiune Sugihara**
(an old Samuri saying)
--Wikipedia, Chiune Sugihara

get there, the refugees would need to pass through two other countries: the Soviet Union and Japan. They needed transit visas¹ for these two countries before they would be allowed to buy tickets to leave Lithuania.

Sugihara convinced Soviet officials to allow the Jews to pass through Soviet-held territory. Then he tried to get permission from his government for transit visas for them to pass through Japan. Three times he

¹ A visa allowing them to pass through the country

sent cables, and three times his request was refused.

Sugihara and his wife decided to start writing visas anyway. They started on July 31, 1940, and wrote and signed visas hour after hour, day after day, for three weeks. They wrote over 300 visas a day. (Three hundred visas would ordinarily be one month's work for a consul.)

Meanwhile, people were standing in line in front of the consulate day and night, waiting for these visas. The Nazis were coming closer and closer. Hundreds of applications became thousands. Sugihara didn't even stop to eat. His wife brought him sandwiches, and massaged his hands at the end of the day.

Finally, Sugihara was ordered by his government to leave Lithuania. Consul Sugihara continued to issue visas from his train window until the moment the train departed on September 1, 1940. As the train started moving, Sugihara gave the consul visa stamp he was using someone in the crowd still waiting for visas, who used it to help more people to escape.

The exact number of people saved through Sugihara's actions is not known. There are various estimates (see Wikipedia), but it seems that the number was probably over 6000. This was the second-largest number of people rescued by anyone from the Nazis during the entire war. Unfortunately, some of the people receiving a visa didn't leave Lithuania and were later murdered by the Nazis.

The Escape

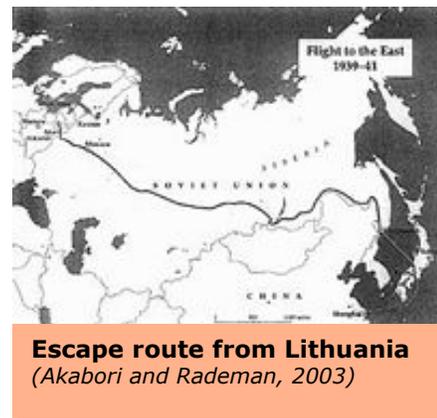
The refugees who got the visas Sugihara issued went by train (paying five times the normal price) from Lithuania across Siberia to Vladivostok. From there most of them continued by ship to Kobe, Japan, where there was a Russian Jewish community. Thousands of "Sugihara Survivors" escaped the Holocaust by making their way to Japan, China, and other countries in the following months.

Two generations have come into this world since 1940. It is estimated that there may be more than 40,000 people alive today who owe their existence to Chiune and Yukiko Sugihara.

What Happened to Sugihara and His Family

Sugihara had done something absolutely unacceptable for a government worker: He had disobeyed. But his government continued to employ him for the rest of the war. They sent the Sugiharas to Czechoslovakia and later to Rumania. When Russian troops invaded Rumania, they put Sugihara and his family in a prison camp, where they stayed for 18 months until the end of World War II. They returned home to Japan in 1946. Then, in 1947, Sugihara was asked to resign from the Foreign Service. According to some references, this was because of what he did in Lithuania.

After the war, Mr. Sugihara never spoke about the extraordinary thing he had done. Then in 1968 a person he had saved found him. This person, Jehoshua Nishri, had been a teenager in 1940. After that, hundreds of others who Sugihara had helped came forward



and told about his courageous decision and acts. In 1985 he was awarded Israel's highest honor, called "Righteous Among the Nations." A park in Jerusalem was named in his honor. Streets were named after him in two cities in Lithuania. In 2005 a documentary appeared about Sugihara entitled *Sugihara: Conspiracy of Kindness*. The Visas for Life



Monument to Chiune Sugihara in Vilnius, Lithuania
(from Wikipedia, Chiune Sugihara)

Foundation works to educate people about what Sugihara did. A life-sized bronze statue of him was erected in 2003 in Los Angeles, in an area known as "Old Tokyo."²

His courageous deed remained relatively unknown in Japan until after his death.

Why He Did It

In 1985, forty-five years after he signed the visas, someone asked Sugihara why he did it. He liked to say: "They were human beings and they needed help." He was also a religious man. He believed in a God of all people, and he used to say, "I may have to disobey my government, but

if I don't I would be disobeying God."

References and Further Reading

The information in this story came from the resources below.

Akabori, A.H. and Rademan, A. 2003. *Shaoul Levy's Tribute to Chiune Sugihara and my tribute to Shaoul Levy*. At the Sushi and Tofu (All Japan News) Website: http://www.sushiandtofu.com/sushi_and_tofu/features_shaoulLevysTributeToChiune_0306.htm Accessed 7/1/2008.

Jewish Virtual Library 2006. *Chiune and Yukiko Sugihara* <http://jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/sugirara.html> Accessed 5/7/2005
If you want to know more about Sugihara the man, take a look at this article. The original source cited in the article for this was Ron Greene, 1995-1997 *Visas For Life: The Remarkable Story of Chiune and Yukiko Sugihara*.

Porco, Anthony *On Chiune Sugihara* In a website called: *Passages of Joy Katzen-Guthrie* <http://www.joyfulnoise.net/JoyChina53.html> . Accessed 5/7/2005.

Wikipedia *Chiune Sugihara* http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chiune_Sugihara
Accessed 3/35/2008. There is a lot of information in this article that is not mentioned here, and further references.

Discussion or Essay Questions

² See Akabori, and Rademan, 2003

When you talk or write, please try to use some of the new words you have learned in this reading. Also, if you have noticed new grammatical structures, try to use them.

1. Tell or write about the most difficult decision you ever made. What was the situation, why did you make the decision you did, and how do you feel about it now?
2. Some people are saying that the Holocaust never happened. Decide for yourself. Research it on the internet. Tell your group what your decision is, or write about what you found in your research.
3. The Jewish Virtual Library article has more to say about the politics of what was going on in 1939-1940 than is mentioned in this story. Why do you think Japan wanted to keep track of what the German and Soviet plans were?
4. What was your country's policy about receiving escaping Jewish refugees during World War II? If your country was controlled by another country at that time, what was that country's policy?
5. Large refugee camps and settlements exist in many countries. Find out a few facts about any one of these places and report on it to your group or write about it.

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