

## “Lithuania at the beginning of WW II”

In early 1940, the consul started exercising one of his rights which he had never had the reason to exercise before, that is, issue transit visas to Japan. Alfred Katz from Łódź asked for a visa. Up until the war he had worked as a representative of Metro Goldwyn Meyer in Łódź, and later he settled in Vilnius as a war refugee, and had now arrived in Kaunas in order to seek out a visa from the Japanese Consulate. Consul Sugihara knew that he could only issue transit visas, and that the applicants had to show evidence of their finances as well as name the country they planned to travel to after Japan, or a guarantor in Japan. Alfred Katz's brother-in-law, Julian D. Berman, worked for Metro Goldwyn Meyer in Japan and could guarantee his upkeep; Katz added that he did not plan on staying in Japan long – his ultimate goal was to reach his sister who lived in the US. Just to be sure, the consul approached the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, asking whether he was permitted to issue this visa. The reply took a long time to come. Sugihara decided to issue the visa regardless and reported this to his authorities, arguing that the applicant met all the requirements, and that a long delay would only impede his departure from Lithuania. Katz never really had any documents in fact, only a Nansen passport, and usually diplomats were not allowed to issue visas to war refugees with incomplete documents, however such a procedural infringement seemed less important to the consul than the opportunity to help someone in a hopeless situation. Being an insightful person, Chiune Sugihara was not wrong in his actions, as the skies over Europe and Lithuania grew darker still. The following events unfolded quickly and unexpectedly.

This was how nine year old Masha Leon remembered June 15, 1940: “That day we went to the cinema to watch the film *Marie Antoinette* with Tyrone Power and Norma Shirer. We went into the cinema hall in an independent Lithuania, but by the time we exited after the film, Russian tanks were already cruising the streets”. Lithuanian sovereignty was completely destroyed and the gradual incorporation of the country into the Soviet Union had begun. The atmosphere of heightened tension and fear grew in the country, and Lithuania's citizens gradually became citizens of the Soviet Union, while foreign citizens who had lived, worked, or studied in independent Lithuania became undesirable in Soviet Lithuania. It was easier to leave the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic with a foreign passport, but where could people go when all of Central Europe had become a war zone? In the end, even leaving Lithuania was difficult as it required money and many documents, not to mention bravery, as anyone could be arrested on grounds of suspicion, being a spy, or a traitor of the soviet nation.

On July 28, Chiune Sugihara sent the Japanese Minister of Foreign Affairs, Yosuke Matsuoka, a telegram announcing the situation in Lithuania, saying that the occupation was followed by terrorist

activites, with around 1,500 people arrested in Vilnius, and about 2,000 elsewhere. Many of those arrested were former Polish officials or officers, as well as former members of the ruling party (the consul most likely meant members of the Lithuanian Nationalists Union - L. V.), as well as other members of political parties, from Socialists and Bundists to Jewish Zionists. The consul explained the atmosphere full of tension and fear, and also mentioned that more and more Jews were requesting transit visas to travel via Japan to the US. According to him, over 100 people applied daily. Other diplomatic legations also reported back to their countries on the tense situation in occupied Lithuania, the arrests and persecution, however, no other diplomat mentioned people approaching them for visas. The Japanese Consul was an exception. Crowds started forming at the consulate day and night, waiting for the opportunity to be issued a visa. Many of them came to Kaunas from Vilnius and had only refugee documents issued by the now defunct government of the Republic of Lithuania, while some also held passports. The news that there was a possibility of getting a transit visa at the Japanese Consulate in Kaunas spread like wildfire among the refugees, and ignoring the difficult journey and dangers ahead, war refugees made their way to Kaunas to ask for these transit visas. Yet this was not the only document necessary before the journey could begin. As Yukiko Sugihara recalls, the crowd of people by the consulate gates appeared as if from nowhere. They stood in lines day and night, a sight which naturally moved the sensitive Sugihara so much that he could not sleep at night. Those who waited looked tired, afraid, and lost, most were clothed in dishevelled attire, some held onto winter clothes despite it being the middle of summer. Sugihara informed his authorities of the situation and asked once again, how should he act, yet the reply was late in coming. On July 22, 1940 the cabinet of ministers was reshuffled in Japan, and the former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Hachirō Arita, was replaced by Yōsuke Matsuoka. Matsuoka was a strict, militant, yet at the same time charismatic leader, who had also served as the president of the Manchurian Railroad. This change in the cabinet of ministers and political reorganisation could explain Tokyo's silence to Consul Sugihara's questions. The diplomat was left with no other option than to take it upon himself and act according to his own initiative. Interestingly, while Foreign Affairs Minister Matsuoka headed the Manchurian Railroad Company he did cooperate with the local Jewish community, and had even hired Abraham Kotsuji as advisor on Jewish affairs, and seemed to be pleased with his work.

Differently to Japan's ally Germany, the Land of the Rising Sun felt no animosity towards the Jews, or at least a majority of those currently serving in the government, so in principle, Japan's position on the "Jewish question" at the start of the war was very different to Germany's position. Seeing people constantly standing outside the consulate, Sugihara started issuing transit visas by working 18 hours a day, according to his wife, Yukiko. On July 31 the consul announced to his superiors

that the Soviets had started to nationalize property, and in a telegram sent a week later he asked whether he could issue visas to Czechoslovakian citizens. This time he received a reply, and was informed that visas could be issued if the applicant's passport was valid and in order, and that if a country of destination was shown. The next day, the consul issued four visas. In addition to persecuting the local inhabitants, the Soviets started closing down foreign legations in Lithuania, but the Japanese Consulate was in operation until August 26, 1940. It is said that once the consulate was shut down and while staying at the Metropolis Hotel until his departure to Berlin on September 4, Sugihara continued to issue visas from his hotel room and even from the train station's platform. An excerpt from the consulate documents dated July 24 states that up till then, 2,139 visas had been issued, however the number of people saved by Sugihara is often increased to about 6,000 people. How can this be? There are several answers.

First of all, children were included in their parents' passports and were not issued with separate visas. Secondly, the consul did not always abide by bureaucratic requirements when people's freedom or lives were at stake. That was how Susan Bluman received a visa in her name, despite her photograph only being attached to her husband's passport with a paperclip. Claims of forged visas cannot be disputed either. In the beginning, the consul wrote out visas by hand, but as the number of applicants grew, he decided to make a consular stamp. Here too his contacts with the Polish underground proved useful, as it was they who produced the stamp for the consul, but most likely, they also kept a copy for themselves. Juozapas Šimkinas, a member of the Vilnius underground, claims that a duplicate existed and that it was used to stamp passports even after Sugihara's departure. There is another version of events that states that once the train pulled out of the Kaunas railway station, the consul literally threw the stamp out through the compartment window, so that his unfinished work could go on in the hands of the refugees themselves. The final and exact number of people is not what is most important in this story though, what is more important is the lesson from the Talmud – *He who saves one life, saves the entire world*. It is also obvious that Sugihara did not always abide by bureaucratic regulations and issued visas to refugees who did not hold all the necessary documents. But once they had their transit visas, the refugees' epic stories really began.

It was crucial to get a visa for the final destination as well, however, foreign legations in Kaunas were closing, and most likely, many were not even approached. In addition to the citizens of various ethnic nationalities in Kaunas and Lithuania in general, there was also a significant local Jewish community which operated a well-regarded Orthodox Judaic Studies Centers. Young Yeshiva students from the whole world came to study in Telšiai and Kaunas, at the Slabada Yeshiva. As such, young rabbis were also suddenly cut off from the whole world and their families. This was the

situation Nathan Gutwirth, a citizen of the Netherlands who was studying in Telšiai found himself in. He approached the Netherlands Consul in Kaunas, Jan Zwartendijk, who had lived in Lithuania since 1938 and was a representative for Philips, however, on June 14, 1940 he accepted the unexpected offer to become the Consul of the Netherlands in Lithuania, as his predecessor had pro-Nazi beliefs. The new consul's native country had been already occupied by the Nazis in May, and on June 15, Red Army units were marching through Lithuania. The unexpected offer and the rapidly changing situation did not confuse J. Zwartendijk, especially since perceptive and experienced diplomats worked at the Netherlands Embassy in Riga and later (after Latvia was occupied by USSR also) they moved to Stockholm, who J. Zwartendijk could approach for advice on how to help N. Gutwirth. L.P.J. de Decker and De Young advised the consul to stamp a Curacao visa into the applicant's passport, as at the time the Suriname and Curacao islands in the Caribbean belonged to the Kingdom of the Netherlands and formal entry did not require a visa, only the permission of the island's governor, despite this only being common knowledge among these Dutch diplomats themselves. It was precisely this type of clever thinking that could help people in a complicated situation and even to escape death.

In order to be issued a formal transit visa and leave the USSR a final point of destination was required. Curacao visas were ideal in this case, and they were issued to N. Gutwirth as well as another 1,200-1,400 people. The exact number of visas issued by J. Zwartendijk remains a mystery as the consul destroyed all documents before returning to his Nazi-occupied Netherlands. The great refugee stories stemmed from Zwartendijk and the Netherlands Consulate on Laisvės alėja (Liberty Avenue) in Kaunas. Holding a Curacao visa, refugees could be certain that it would be simpler to receive a Japanese transit visa, although it is now known that the Japanese Consul was more likely to look at individuals' needs rather than bureaucratic standards. A variety of passports can now be found with both Sugihara's and Zwartendijk's visas, while others have only one of the consul's visas. These two diplomats had never met one another, and it is said that they only spoke via telephone a few times. Such diplomatic strategies and "gaps" in documents could be easily understood to both Sugihara and Zwartendijk who had seen these lost and frightened people with their own eyes, yet not to captains of Japanese ships or border personnel, not to mention the encroaching net of the NKVD. The earliest arrivals were easier to deal with, as even before the consulate's closure, Sugihara had heard that some Japanese captains were refusing to accept passengers with documents that were not in order, and border personnel also doubted the validity of some documents they had been shown. In response to these comments, Sugihara replied, that perhaps there were some discrepancies in documents due to some oversights, but if individuals who had been issued Japanese visas were to be denied entry, Japan's prestige and legal system would be

dealt a heavy blow. Such arguments sufficed to ensure that document “gaps” were not bothering Japanese border personnel so much.

Dealing with the NKVD was more difficult. Even documents that were in order could raise the suspicions of this repressive organisation. If everything was correct, perhaps the person was a spy and could not be released, and conversely, if someone did not have all the necessary documents but was asking permission to leave the country, they probably had something to hide. In other words, the scores of war refugees proved to be an extra burden for the LSSR, and it also cannot be denied that war refugees, among whom there were many Jews, were considered as potential foreign spies by the Soviets, and were thus undesirable. Consul Sugihara’s several requests and intermediation on behalf of one or another individual to be issued with permission from the NKVD to depart the Soviet Union could have been interpreted by the Soviets as an opportunity to shake off an additional burden and alleviate themselves of potentially dangerous persons. The fate of Lithuanian passport holders was different – they were not issued with NKVD departure permits so easily, as unlike war refugees, Lithuanian inhabitants were automatically considered citizens of the Soviet Union, and as such, they were seen as a necessary labour force, and if required, a military force as well. This explains why Lithuanians or people of other nationalities make up less than one percent of Sugihara’s visa lists. Most of the graphs contain the word “Pole”, but even in this case, NKVD approbation was necessary. In this story so far, the position and role of Soviet power structures is not clear, it is also unclear why the Soviet Union initially allowed war refugees to travel across its entire territory, yet after several months leaving became more and more difficult, until it became virtually impossible. In this chain, personal connections and the official’s position were important factors, such that the General Secretary of the LSSR Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Plenipotentiary Minister, Pijus Glovackas, mediated in the issue of NKVD departure permits from the Soviet Union. In his pro memoria, P. Glovackas mentioned that on July 12, 1940 he was visited by Mr. Sugihara who presented his case, whereupon the minister noted that, “Mr. Sugihara asked that his consular staff member Kuncėvič be issued with a visa, and I promised to do so”. It is likely that there were other cases when the consul asked for assistance and intermediation from Mr. Glovackas, yet he was too minor to have any great influence.

The NKVD permit not only signalled the opportunity to leave the Soviet Union, but also cleared the way for how it could be done. Individuals with a permit would depart Kaunas for Moscow and stay at the *Inturist* Hotel waiting for the train to Vladivostok, the tickets for which could also be purchased at the *Inturist* counter. As this was a state organisation, the treasury of the Soviet Union would profit from war refugees with an inflow of US dollars, where the minimum journey cost was about 200 US dollars. Officials and *Inturist* staff understood that people in such a desperate

situation were prepared to pay even more, and undoubtedly seized on this opportunity. The journey on the Trans Siberian Railway from Moscow to Vladivostok took about two weeks, yet even those travelling with documents that were in order and a ticket in their pockets did not feel safe – the trains would often be escorted by soldiers, while Jews from the Soviet Union would sometimes face passengers at train stations with posters and calls to remain in the USSR and live “happily” in the Jewish Autonomous Region donated by Stalin, Birobidzhan. No one fell for these offers however, and longed only to board the ship that would take them across to Japan, usually the port of Kobe. Although Sugihara sometimes issued visas to people holding documents that were not in order, few actually intended to remain in Japan – the new arrivals looked for further opportunities to reach the US, Canada or even New Zealand. Incidentally, no one ever actually reached Curacao either, which was the destination identified on visas issued by Consul Zwartendijk. Returning to the NKVD question as to why the Soviets allowed war refugees to travel across their entire territory, there is one possible answer – it was a chance to recruit potential spies, “Listen, we will give you freedom, but you will work for us...”, but it appears no one took up this offer, but there are witness reports that such recruitment did take place.