

EVENT SUMMARY:

Refugee Rescues and Humanitarian Acts during WWII

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Dr Chiharu Inaba's Talk

Thank you for inviting me here to give a lecture today. My name is Chiharu Inaba. I'm a Professor of International Relations at Meijo University in Nagoya. This photo is of Chiyune Sugihara Square where Chiyune Sugihara graduated high school. In front of the high school is this square that was built in 201. In fact, I also helped build this square. Today I will speak about Sugihara and the British contributions for rescuing Jewish refugees in Lithuania in 1940. There are two documents I'd like to explain a bit about now.

I began conducting research with historians from Lithuania 10 years ago. It was then identified that in the summer of 1940, when Sugihara rescued the Jews, at that time Lithuania was not part of the Holocaust yet. In Lithuania the Holocaust started after the German attack against the Soviet Union in June 1941. So then what really happened in Lithuania in the summer of 1940, and how did Sugihara rescue Jews from Lithuania to Japan? Today I will explain a little bit about the Lithuanian situation, as well as the Polish situation after the outbreak of the Second World War, and then what really happened with the rescued Jews.

In 1939, refugees first escaped to Lithuania. The 1st of September, 1939 was the outbreak of the Second World War. West Poland was occupied by Hitler, and East Poland was occupied by Stalin. War refugees came from Poland to Lithuania. Firstly, Polish soldiers arrived, and then peasants from the Słowiński region, which was part of East Prussia. It was occupied by German farmers and all the Polish farmers and peasants were thrown from Słowiński region to Lithuania. Ultra Orthodox Jews came from East Poland. Bourgeois Jews came from West Poland.

Two thirds of refugees came from East Poland, which was occupied by the Soviet Union. In East Poland, there was no Holocaust, but many Jewish refugees came from Soviet occupied areas. Why was

this? This is because the Soviet Union denied freedom of religion at that time. They shut down Catholic and Orthodox monasteries, as well as Jewish Yeshiva Schools. Many religious leaders were liquidated or deported to Siberia. Orthodox Jews, and not only Orthodox Jews, but many of them decided to run away to Lithuania, which guaranteed freedom of religion.

There was of course a border between Eastern Poland and Lithuania, but no fences, so everyone could easily pass through. It was impossible to run away from West Poland via East Poland to Lithuania; only Jewish refugees from Soviet-occupied Poland could pass through. More than 30,000 refugees came from Poland from September 1939 to early 1940. Lithuanians never refused these Jewish refugees. It was impossible to refuse them because there was no proper border. So they were obliged to accept them. The Lithuanian government established six refugee camps and eight POW camps. Not only camps, but they also supplied food for 30,000 people, as well as clothes, medical care and education. Lithuanian winters are similar to Finland. It's terribly cold. You can't wear autumnal clothes. You need a very thick coat and boots. So, the Lithuanian government had to prepare these clothes for the refugees. But basically, no country wanted to accept refugees. But for those refugees who wanted to leave, the Lithuanian government would support immigration to foreign countries.

Most of the refugees came from Poland to Lithuania. Most of them didn't have passports. So the biggest question about Sugihara's rescue story is how he issued passports to those refugees that didn't have passports. How did he get them visas? What was important was the issuing of refugee certificates, because it gave refugees the possibility to live in the camp and be able to accept food and clothes. Another crucial thing was the issuing of safe conducts, known as *leidimas*, in Lithuanian. This was for refugees who wanted to leave Lithuania. But *leidimas* was the most important thing. Sugihara issued safe conducts, which were substitutes for their passports. The other issue was visas. Another complicated thing was that some refugees got *zaswiadczenie*, which was a certificate in wartime from the British Consulate-General. I will show this. This is a Lithuanian government issued *leidimas* safe conduct. Then here is the Sugihara visa. It is written here that this visa is for refugees. These refugees could go to Japan via Iraq and Palestine. But the final destination for Jews was Palestine. So to go via Palestine to Japan was rather strange.

The *zaswiadczenie* was the same as a safe conduct. It was for those who didn't have a passport; they could keep this document, and it would allow them to leave Lithuania to go to foreign countries. This document was issued by the British Consulate-General in Kaunas because the consulate was in charge of affairs of the Polish exile government in London.

The Lithuanian government received the refugees without refusal and then provided refugee camps and offered accommodation, food, clothes, medicine, and other important facilities including safe conduct. The British Consulate General, Thomas Preston, issued *zaswiadczenie* certificates for the refugees, who didn't have passports or other identification. I asked the Lithuanian scholars why there were two kinds of certificates. Why did the government not issue all the certificates? Why were some of them receiving certificates from the British Consulate General? I asked them, but their answer was rather unclear. Perhaps the Lithuanian government didn't have enough money to issue all the certificates.

In June 1940, Lithuania was occupied by the Soviet Union, and at the beginning of August, Lithuania was annexed by Stalin. If refugees didn't leave Lithuania by the end of 1940, they had to become Soviet citizens. But again, it was rather complicated because what about the Lithuanians? Lithuanians obviously have a Lithuanian nationality. Lithuanians immediately became Soviet citizens. Soviet citizens couldn't leave or travel without the KGB's permission. Only refugees could leave from Lithuania to Japan.

Again, it's rather complicated since after the Soviet occupation, freedom of religion in Lithuania wasn't approved. So refugees who couldn't accept the Soviet regime, such as the Jewish rabbis and the Yeshiva students and Orthodox Jews, wished to immigrate to other countries, and they asked diplomatic missions in Kaunas to issue visas. So those refugees visited the Japanese legation in the middle of July and asked to be issued Japanese visas. Consul Sugihara set conditions for the Japanese transit visa. They had to hold a visa for his or her final destination. Also they needed tickets and to be able to pay for travel expenses. However, these refugees did not have a final destination, nor did they have money. So there was a big obstacle in front of them.

However, the Dutch consul Jan Zwartendijk issued Curaçao visas for refugees. Curaçao is a Caribbean island. To enter Curaçao, you did not need a visa. Zwartendijk explained that to arrive in Curaçao, you did not need a visa, but he supervised the writing of these "visas" and issued them to many refugees. This was therefore their final destination. Money was also very important. But most of them didn't have money, so they sought support from the US Jewish funds. The Joint Distribution Committee in New York, raised funding in the United States and Canada, and supported Jews in German occupied Europe, as well as all over Europe. The JDC delegation to Lithuania, Moses Beckelman, would have promised more than 1,000 refugees who didn't have money to arrange their travel expenses. Therefore Sugihara's condition B was completed. These are Sugihara visas. Here is a list of 2,140 people that were issued a visa.

But again, refugees found it difficult to travel to Japan. For wealthier refugees, it was no problem, they had the money. In total there were 500-700 wealthier refugees who departed Kaunas in September and arrived in Japan in October and November 1940. These refugees just bought a trans-Siberian railway ticket, and came to Japan. It was very easy. But many of the refugees didn't have money. There were around 1500 poorer refugees, made up of Yeshiva students, rabbis, and their families, who departed between Dec 1940 till the end of February 1941. However, many were refused, and weren't allowed to enter Japan, mainly because many of Sugihara's visas were false visas.

In the Lithuanian Special Archive buildings, there are a lot of false Sugihara visas. The person whose document here is shown was someone that was arrested. In the special archive there are 85 false *zaswiadczenie* certificates. These certificates were from people that were arrested by the KGB as well. This is also an example of a false Sugihara visa. There were two kinds of false Sugihara visas. But the Soviet KGB had a difficult time identifying the false visas, because they obviously couldn't read Japanese. However, when those refugees arrived in Tsuruga in Japan, the Japanese passport control officers immediately could identify a false visa. But once they departed from the Soviet Union, they no longer had Soviet nationality. So they could not return to the Soviet Union. So they became refugees again.

The Jewcom in Kobe stood as a guarantee for refugees who didn't have enough money or official visas. In spring 1941, more than 1,500 refugees were stranded in Kobe. The JDC supported their living expenses, obtained visas to the US or Canada and paid for their tickets. The Kobe Holiness Church also supported refugees. Here is an image of the church distributing apples among refugees.

On the 28th of July, 1941, Japan invaded southern French Indochina, and on the 1st of August, the United States carried out embargo on oil exports and stopped any remittance to Japan, including its Jewish funds support. In August, most US citizens left Japan. So 1,098 Jewish refugees were isolated in Japan. Most of them were living in Kobe. The Japanese government deported those refugees to Shanghai, which was under Japanese control at that time. Unfortunately, on the 8th of December 1941, the Pacific War was broken. Most of the refugees were isolated in Shanghai up to the end of World War II.

Ultimately, 2,000 to 2,200 refugees came to Japan. One third were wealthier Jews, one third were the Yeshiva students, rabbi, and their families, and one third were the other Jewish and non-Jewish refugees. The US Jewish funds supported two-thirds of the refugees and totaled \$272,000. Refugees were rescued by not only Sugihara but also Lithuania, the United States and the United Kingdom. Thank you for listening.