

## Rescue of Polish Jews Via East Asia

Soviet troops invaded Vilna on September 19, 1939. On October 10 they transferred the city to the independent republic of Lithuania. Soon, about 14,000 Polish Jews fled to Vilna, hoping to escape both the Nazis and the Soviets. These included Jewish leaders such as Menachem Begin (later prime minister of Israel), about 2,000 members of the Zionist Youth movements, and students of more than 20 Polish yeshivas.

In June 1940 the Soviets reoccupied Lithuania; many of the refugees searched for a way to get out. That summer, they were given an opportunity to flee to other countries via East Asia. The Dutch consul in Kovno began issuing many refugees visas to Curacao, a Dutch colony in the Caribbean. Subsequently, the refugees asked the local Japanese consul, Sempo Sugihara, for transit visas that would allow them to get to Curacao via Japan. Of his own accord, Sugihara granted thousands of visas-against the instructions of the Japanese government-until he and other consuls were expelled by the Soviets. Zorah Warhaftig, the head of the local Palestine Office for Polish Refugees, helped the refugees in the final step of the emigration process: applying for Soviet exit permits. They were finally allowed to leave the country after refugee leaders convinced the Soviets to grant them the necessary documents. The first group arrived in Japan in October 1940.

Other refugees received visas to Curacao from the Dutch consuls in Stockholm, Sweden and Kobe, Japan. They procured Japanese transit visas from consuls in Russia and were aided by the Japanese N.Y.K. shipping line, which provided visas for those who had bought boat tickets. Hundreds of refugees reached the United States, Palestine, and other countries by traveling through Japan.

In the spring of 1941, the Japanese authorities tried to stop Jewish refugees from entering Japan. However, over 500 Jews managed to enter between April and August. That summer, the Japanese sent those Jewish refugees with nowhere else to go to Shanghai, China, where they stayed for the rest of the war. From October 1940 to August 1941, 3,489 Jewish refugees entered Japan.

