



Sugihara, Sempo

(1900--1986), Japanese Consul in Kovno, Lithuania, who rescued Jewish refugees during World War II.

Sugihara became consul in Kovno in the fall of 1939, soon after Germany had invaded and conquered nearby Poland. Thousands of Jewish refugees fled to Lithuania, which at that point was still operating as an independent country. However, in June 1940 the Soviet Union took control of Lithuania, prompting many refugees to seek some means of escape.

In early August 1940, just weeks before all foreign diplomats were supposed to leave Lithuania on the orders of the Soviet authorities, Sugihara was contacted by Dr. Zorah Warhaftig, the director of the Jewish Agency's Palestine Office in Kovno. Warhaftig described an escape plan to Sugihara, whereby Jewish refugees would travel to Curacao, an island in the Caribbean controlled by the Dutch, where permits were not needed in order to enter. To get to Curacao, the refugees would need to travel through the Soviet Union and Japan. Thus, Warhaftig asked Sugihara to give the refugees the necessary transit visas so that they could travel via Japan. The Soviet authorities had already agreed to let the refugees leave and travel through the Soviet Union---if the refugees could obtain visas for Japan.

Japan, which was a German ally, refused to approve the plan. However, in a bold and rare act of diplomatic resistance, Sugihara decided to go against his Government's orders and began issuing transit visas. Over the next few weeks, he handed out some 1,600 visas, saving as many lives. Some of the most famous refugees to use Sugihara's visas were the rabbinical students from the Mir yeshiva, who traveled through Japan to Shanghai, China, where they spent the rest of the war in safety.

By the end of August Sugihara was expelled from Lithuania and transferred to another Japanese consulate. When he returned to Japan in 1947, he was asked to leave the Foreign Service due to his act of defiance in 1940. In 1984 Sugihara was designated as Righteous among the Nations by Yad Vashem. (see also Rescue of Polish Jews via East Asia.)

