

Chiune (Sempo) Sugihara (January 1, 1900-1986) was the first Japanese diplomat posted to Lithuania. He was born to a middle-class family in Japan's Gifu Prefecture on the main Japanese Island of Honshu. Sugihara is sometimes also referred to as "Chiune," an earlier rendition of the Japanese character for "Sempo," part of his formal name.

Sugihara graduated from the exclusive Harbin Gakuin, Japan's training center for experts on the Soviet Union. As the director of the foreign ministry in Manchukuo, a puppet state Japan had established in Manchuria under Japanese supervision, Sugihara negotiated the purchase of the North Manchurian railroad from the Soviet Union in 1932.

Because Sugihara was fluent in Russian, the Japanese sent him to the Lithuanian capital, Kovno, in November 1939. He had learned the language from Russian emigres during 16 years in Harbin, Manchuria. He was ordered to provide Japan with intelligence on Soviet and German troop movements in the Baltic region.

Sugihara also exchanged information with members of the Polish underground in Lithuania and issued them visas for transit through Japan in 1940. He recognized the urgency of the situation in Lithuania following the occupation by Soviet forces in June 1940 and the accompanying wave of arrests by Soviet secret police. Sugihara may also have realized that, with western Europe engulfed in war, the most likely avenue for escape for refugees in Lithuania was an eastern route through the Soviet Union to Japan.

In the summer of 1940, when refugees came to him with bogus visas for Curacao and other Dutch possessions in America, Sugihara decided to facilitate their escape from war-torn Europe. In the absence of clear instructions from Tokyo, he granted 10-day visas for transit through Japan to hundreds of refugees who held Curacao destination visas. Before closing his consulate in the fall of 1940, Sugihara even gave visas to refugees who lacked all travel papers.

After Sugihara had issued some 1,800 visas, he received a cable from Tokyo reminding him: "You must make sure that they [refugees] have finished their procedure for their entry visas and also they must possess the travel money or the money that they need during their stay in Japan. Otherwise, you should not give them the transit visa."

In his response to the cable, Sugihara admitted issuing visas to people who had not completed all arrangements for destination visas. He explained the extenuating circumstances: Japan was the only

transit country available for those going in the direction of the United States, and his visas were needed for departure from the Soviet Union. Sugihara suggested that travelers who arrived in the Soviet port of Vladivostok with incomplete paperwork should not be allowed to board ship for Japan. Tokyo wrote back that the Soviet Union insisted that Japan honor all visas already issued by its consulates.

By the time Sugihara left Lithuania he had issued visas to 2,140 persons. These visas also covered some 300 others, mostly children. Not everyone who held visas was able to leave Lithuania, however, before the Soviet Union stopped granting exit visas.

Sugihara left Lithuania in early September 1940. The Japanese transferred him to Prague in Bohemia and then to Bucharest, Romania, Germany's ally, where he remained until after the end of the war. During the victorious Soviet army's march through the Balkans in 1944, the Soviets arrested Sugihara together with other diplomats from enemy nations. Soviet authorities held him and his family, under fairly benign conditions, for the next three years. When Sugihara returned to Japan in 1947, the Foreign Ministry retired him with a small pension as part of a large staff reduction enacted under the American occupation.

Sugihara held a variety of jobs after the war including one for a Japanese trading company in Moscow from 1960 to 1975. Shortly before his death, Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority in Israel, declared Sugihara "Righteous Among the Nations" for his aid to the refugees in Lithuania during World War II. Yad Vashem conferred the title in 1984, honoring the former Japanese consul with a ceremony in Jerusalem in January 1985.

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