

And the Greatest Japanese Person Ever Is...Chiune Sugihara

A man who defied the Japanese government and risked his career to save the lives of thousands of Jewish people (mainly from Poland) who were living in Lithuania during WWII.

On July 18, 1940, a crowd of Jewish refugees gathered outside the Japanese consulate building in Kaunas, Lithuania. With Nazi Germany rapidly advancing east, their only hope of survival it seemed was to obtain a transit visa for Japan. Acting consul from the Netherlands Jan Zwartendijk had issued them with permits for Curaçao, a Dutch colonial territory in the West Indies where visas weren't required. To get through the Soviet Union, however, they required transit visas for a third country. That's where Chiune Sugihara came in.

Aside from Zwartendijk, he was the only remaining foreign consul in the city. Though sympathetic to their cause, Sugihara first wanted to get approval from the Japanese foreign ministry before issuing any visas. Three times he wired a request; three times he was refused.

With the situation becoming more desperate, Sugihara decided to ignore his government and take matters into his own hands. Despite knowing that his career and life were at stake, he worked 18 to 20 hours a day issuing more than 2,000 visas, many of which included dependents. It's estimated that between 6,000 and 10,000

people escaped because of his selflessness. The Japanese foreign office asked Sugihara to resign in 1947.

“My father just did what he felt was right even if there were repercussions,” says Sugihara’s youngest and only surviving son, Nobuki Sugihara. “He would never think of himself as a hero and rarely talked about what he did in Kaunas. I knew nothing about it until I was 19. He got a call from the Israeli embassy in Japan and we went there together. Commercial attaché Jehoshua Nishri, whose family had been saved by a visa [my father] issued, managed to track him down after trying unsuccessfully through the ministry of foreign affairs numerous times. Nishri informed us that many others had escaped. My father never really displayed his emotions, but that was pleasing for him to hear because he had no idea what had happened to them.”

For decades, little was known about Sugihara. Things started to change in the years leading up to his death, and in 1985, a year before his passing, he was recognized in Israel as Righteous Among the Nations, a title given to non-Jews who showed great courage during the Holocaust to help keep Jewish people alive. Interest in the former diplomat has continued to grow since. He’s had streets, museums and an asteroid named in his honor. Numerous books, documentaries and films have been written about him, including the 2015 movie *Persona Non Grata*.

“It’s good that people know about what he did and I believe his story will be included in Japanese textbooks, but I’m concerned the truth is being distorted,” Nobuki tells us. “I’ve listened to his recordings and he doesn’t mention throwing visas from a train, which was written in a biography and has been repeated many

times. It's often been said that he was born in Yaotsu when in fact his birthplace was Mino City. I feel the movie has lots of inaccuracies too, and Toshiaki Karasawa's character was nothing like my father. Also, the female Russian spy didn't exist."

Persona Non Grata director Cellin Gluck, a man of Japanese and Jewish descent, defended the film to Weekender. "Every story needs a certain amount of romance," he says. "The character of Irina is based on an actual person but since she didn't come back into his life in Kaunas, we decided to fictionalize her. We took great care to portray Chiune Sugihara as a man of compassion and intelligence who did what he did guided by his own moral compass."

"We did all we could to honor Mr. Sugihara without turning him into a cartoon superhero, which would have been unacceptable. It's an important story about an individual who did what he believed was right regardless of the consequences. I hope people that watch it can feel that one person, no matter the odds, can truly make a difference."