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Commemorating 'Visas for Life' on Holocaust Remembrance Day

Today the name of Sugihara Chiune adorns parks and streets, while exhibitions, films and documentaries tell the story of the Visas for Life.

By MOTEGI TOSHIMITSU, GABRIELIUS LANDSBERGIS JANUARY 26, 2021 20:28



THE 'SUGIHARA House' in Kaunas.
(photo credit: SUGIHARA HOUSE')

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On [International Holocaust Remembrance Day](#) – the 27th of January – we commemorate the tragedy of the Holocaust and pay respect from the bottom of our hearts to the brave people who during those dark times went beyond their duty and took personal risk to save human lives. Among them is a Japanese diplomat, Sugihara Chiune (also known as Sempo), who helped thousands of Jewish people escape from Europe.

In the autumn of 1939, some 35,000 refugees from Poland, then occupied by the Nazis and the USSR, fled to Lithuania seeking safety: families, children and elderly persons, students and people of different professions and religions. They left home, often without means of identification or subsistence, arrived in Lithuania, and were taken care of. Among those refugees were some young Jewish students from yeshivas in Kleck, Mir, Lomza, Kamenec, Grodno and Pinsk – world-famous Jewish educational institutions at the time. Many students of the Kleck yeshiva found shelter in Lithuania, while the Mir yeshiva came in corpore – 500 students and teachers in all. Soon after Chiune began working in Kaunas as a Japanese diplomat in 1939, he witnessed those refugees arriving there.

In the summer of 1940, Lithuania was occupied by the USSR, just as many other European states were occupied by the Nazis or the USSR that summer. Jewish refugees in Lithuania had to seek another place of refuge and many gathered at the Japanese Consulate in Kaunas in hopes of obtaining visas. Facing this humanitarian crisis, Chiune made the brave decision to issue visas, later called 'Visas for Life', though many of the refugees did not meet the requirements. More than 2,100 transit visas were issued during his last weeks in Lithuania. Those visas enabled the refugees to travel to and through Japan, saving many lives.

The Jewish refugees had to travel thousands of miles on the Trans-Siberian Railway and cross the ocean before they finally reached their destination, in North America. On their long journey to freedom, there were many others who helped the refugees. Ultimately, the humanitarian acts of Chiune and those who followed him contributed to the survival of thousands of innocent people. After the Israeli Holocaust Memorial, Yad Vashem, honored him in 1984 with the title of 'Righteous Among the Nations', the name of Sugihara Chiune became widely known.

Today the name of Sugihara Chiune adorns parks and streets, while exhibitions, films and documentaries tell the story of the Visas for Life. In addition, the former Japanese Consulate building in Kaunas has been renamed the Sugihara

House, with a museum established there by people of goodwill in Lithuania. It is thus now a symbol of humanitarianism. Spread from person to person, in large part thanks to the many events and initiatives of the Sugihara House, Chiune's legacy serves as a reminder of the Holocaust for younger generations and a foundation of friendship among Japan, Lithuania and the Jewish communities.

Chiune was not the only diplomat who showed courage and determination in that time of crisis. Diplomats from a variety of countries likewise saved the lives of many Jews during World War II. To remember those courageous diplomats and the importance of humanitarianism, the Government of Lithuania hosted an international conference in Kaunas in September 2020, to which the foreign ministers of Japan, Lithuania, Israel and the Netherlands together sent messages.

Although many years have passed and the world has changed, the importance of humanitarianism remains unchanged. Also, this principle – the belief that the human life is invaluable – is shared by more countries and citizens than ever before. Today, on International Holocaust Remembrance Day, let us pay tribute to those who, guided by their moral compass, did not remain indifferent in the face of the tragedy of the Holocaust.

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