



In Search of Sugihara: The Elusive Japanese Diplomat Who Risked his Life to Rescue 10,000 Jews From the Holocaust

Hillel Levine

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On August 2, 1940, as on every other morning for weeks before, a long line of Jewish refugees waited outside the Japanese consulate in Kaunas, Lithuania. Many had already witnessed Nazi atrocities in Poland and other Axis-occupied lands, and they were desperate to escape. To leave Europe they needed foreign transit visas. And at the window, the smiling Japanese consul was issuing them. Before his government closed down the consulate and reassigned him to Berlin, he would issue thousands of such visas.

This is the story of Chiune Sugihara, a diplomat and spy who saved as many as 10,000 Jews from deportation to concentration camps and almost certain death. Because of his extreme modesty, Sugihara's tremendous act of moral courage is only now beginning to become widely known.

Unlike Raoul Wallenberg, the Swedish diplomat whose government sent him to Hungary with the express purpose of saving Jews, and Oskar Schindler, the German industrialist who at least initially had a vested economic interest in protecting the lives of "his Jews," Sugihara had no apparent reason to perform his acts of rescue. Indeed, he acted in direct violation of official Japanese policy, which directed all government and military personnel to cooperate with the murderous policies of their Nazi allies. Examining Sugihara's education and background -- a background shared with the colonial administrators and military men who committed "the rape of Nanjing" -- author Hillel Levine finds nothing that explains his extraordinary behavior.

Levine's search has taken him from the old Japanese consul building in Kaunas (now Kovno), Lithuania, to the Australian outback; across Japan from the rice fields of Sugihara's native town to the boardrooms of conglomerates where his younger schoolmates still hold power. But the more Levine sought answers to Sugihara's puzzling behavior, the more he encountered questions. Remarkably, Chiune Sugihara was not the only Japanese official to save Jews. Yet none was ever punished for insubordination. Was there a secret Japanese plan to save Jews from Nazi genocide?

Much Holocaust scholarship focuses on the perpetrators of evil, trying to illuminate what drove ordinary men and women to commit horrifying and murderous acts. But perhaps as difficult to understand is the phenomenon of rescue: what inspired courageous individuals to swim against the tide of cruelty and indifference. This sensitive and nuanced biography concludes that there is no link between a person's background and his moral inclinations. Mercy remains a divine mystery despite our human craving to reduce it to behavioristic formulas.

This book does not attempt to explain "man's humanity to man." Instead Levine has woven a fascinating narrative of one man's heroic efforts to save lives, in the midst of so many seeking to destroy them.

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