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By Roger Pulvers

Sixty years ago, during the evening of Aug. 14, 1945, Emperor Hirohito recorded the speech of surrender to be broadcast to the Japanese nation the next day at noon.

Aug. 15, 1945 found Sugihara Chiune, his wife, Yukiko, and their three little children in Romania, interned there by the Red Army. It was unclear what their fate would be. Japan had been officially at war with the Soviet Union, albeit for only a few days.

Who was Sugihara Chiune, and how did he come to be in Bucharest at the war's end? At a time when Japan is being branded in some quarters as the unrepentant perpetrator of cruel misdeeds during World War II and before, a look at the life of this man of conscience may serve to lighten this dark image. It may also be a guide to Japanese people living today: proof that an individual can make a difference, even in the most callous of times.

I was fortunate to have known Sugihara's eldest son, Hiroki, who was named after Hirota Koki, the prime minister in 1936 when Hiroki was born.

The elder Sugihara was a diplomat who was posted to the Japanese consulate in Kaunas, Lithuania, in November 1939. He was soon to be presented with a striking dilemma.

"My father woke up one morning in late July, 1940, to see a great crowd of people milling outside the gate of the consulate," Hiroki told me in July 2000. "I remember staring down at them from the second-story window. They were Jews, and they had come to get exit visas from my father."

Strict instructions

Sugihara was under strict instructions from his superiors at the Foreign Ministry in Tokyo not to issue any Japanese visa other than a transit visa, and this only when the applicant had a valid visa to a subsequent destination. Regarding this issue, as to the extent of Sugihara's insubordination, it has been said that the Foreign Ministry specifically forbade Sugihara, personally, from issuing visas. Whatever the case (the point remains disputed), Sugihara was certainly acting contrary to procedures.

Sugihara issued more than 2,000 visas, some of them covering more than one member of a family, to Jews who were desperate to escape the Nazi terror that had overtaken Poland and was gradually moving eastward. Again, some sources have given him credit for saving up to 6,000 lives. The actual number of visas was just over 2,300. It will never be known exactly how many people that covered.

"The consulate in Kaunas was shut down on Sept. 4, 1940," Hiroki told me, "but my father continued to pen visas even at the railway station, throwing the last stamped passports out

of the window of our train to Jews whose lives would, thanks to him, be spared."

The more than 2,000 refugees traveled by train across Siberia and on to Japan, from where many eventually made it to Shanghai, Australia, the United States or other destinations. Incidentally, those Jewish refugees were treated humanely while in Japan, despite general Japanese sympathies for the Axis cause.

Meanwhile, Sugihara made his own way from Kaunas to posts in Prague, Konigsberg and, eventually, in 1942, Bucharest, where he remained until 1945. His superb command of Russian may be what saved him from being sent to a POW camp in the USSR. During his internment, he naturally spoke often with Red Army officers who recognized the cultural affinities they had with this cosmopolitan Japanese.

Born on Jan. 1, 1900, in the village of Yaotsu in Gifu Prefecture, Sugihara went to Waseda University in Tokyo in 1918, but dropped out the next year to join the Foreign Ministry. After being sent by the ministry to Harbin in China, he converted to Russian Orthodox Christianity and married a White Russian woman named Klavdia. Klavdia, by the way, was not Jewish, as some sources have claimed. Sugihara's compassion toward the Jews whom he saved was not due to any special rapport with Jewish people. He was saving humans from injustice that he could not conscience.

In Harbin, Sugihara studied Russian and became, it was said, the best Russian-speaker in the Japanese government. He also negotiated, on terms exceedingly favorable to Japan, the agreement with the Soviet Union that allowed for the expansion of Japan's Northern Manchurian Railway. Then in 1935, after divorcing Klavdia (who died several years ago, age 93, in a Russian nursing home in Sydney), Sugihara returned to Japan and married Kikuchi Yukiko, Hiroki's mother. Chiune insisted that his wife be baptized. After the marriage the couple lived in Ikebukuro in Tokyo.

Sugihara's return to Japan was an early indication that this man was not a slave of the conventional (read imperial) wisdom of his government. The brutal treatment of Chinese by his compatriots in Manchukuo disturbed him profoundly, and he resigned his position as Vice Chief of the Foreign Ministry there because of it. Once back in Japan, too, he was shaken by the radical army officers' attempted coup in the Ni-ni-roku Incident of 1936. Although he had himself been a lieutenant (reserve) in the army, Sugihara viewed the army's subsequent inordinate power in Japan with alarm.

The Soviets were not well disposed to Sugihara, given his hand in the railway negotiations, and disallowed his proposed next posting, to Moscow. This came as a great personal disappointment to him, as he had aspired to the ambassadorial post in Moscow. He was

dispatched instead, in 1937, to Helsinki and then to Kaunas where, with his linguistic skills (he had studied German as well as Russian), he was invaluable to the Japanese foreign service. Lithuania was an ideal spot to keep a Janus-eye on Germany and the USSR.

Pure humanity

Why did Sugihara go out on a limb to save those Jews? His son, Hiroki, saw it as a matter of personal conscience.
"My father made a decision based on pure humanity. If you had the power to save people and didn't, what kind of a man were you?"

In 1946, Sugihara, his wife and their three children, found themselves on the same trans-Siberian train line ridden by the Jewish refugees he had saved. They were finally repatriated in April 1947. Before long, however, Sugihara was relieved of his duties at the Foreign Ministry, in what some have interpreted as a rebuke for his disobedience. This explanation fits into the stereotypical view of the conformist Japanese, but I believe it was not the case here. Instead, Sugihara was simply dismissed in the postwar changing of the guard that saw a third of the Foreign Ministry's staff receive their marching orders in those chaotic years.

Afterward, Sugihara found various jobs, one of them as manager of a PX on an American base. Eventually he took up a position with a trading company and moved, alone, to Moscow, where he lived for 16 years, with annual trips back to Japan to see his family. He passed away in Japan on July 31, 1986.

It isn't the Japanese who, in recent years, have revived the memory of this courageous diplomat, but rather some of the Jews who survived thanks to his intervention. It is sad to say that he is not the hero in Japan that he should be. Some people explain this by emphasizing his insubordination, saying that Japanese are not well disposed to those who go against the grain of custom.
To me the explanation for his relative obscurity lies rather in the Japanese desire to forget everything about the war, to wash over it, to throw out baby, bathwater and bath at once. Sugihara is an embarrassment because his life only reminds Japanese of what they did during the war. The fate of the Jews, moreover, is not the issue in Japan that it is in the West. No one in Japan is rushing to make a film titled "Sugihara's List." Nevertheless, due to the good offices and support of ex-Prime Minister Takeshita Noboru, a memorial to Sugihara was erected in a Yaotsu park dedicated to his memory. He is a local hero, not, alas, a national one.

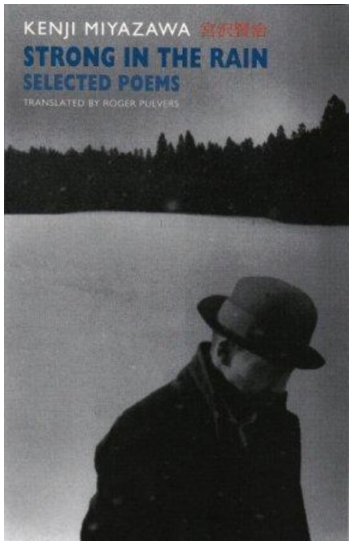
"I think that my father may have felt more at home with Russians than he did with Japanese," Hiroki told me. "I guess he wasn't very much at home in postwar Japan."

There are tens of thousands of people around the world today who would not have been born had

it not been for the compassion of Sugihara Chiune.

On a day such as this one, perhaps it will help both Japan and those who genuinely wish this country well to remember that the devils of the past were not alone in their undertakings. There were angels in their midst. Thanks to Japanese like Sugihara Chiune, "Lest we forget" may justifiably be said in the same breath as "kindly remember."

Roger Pulvers is an author, playwright and theater director, and a professor at Tokyo Institute of Technology. A newly completed collection of 12 stories from the bible updated for this century, THE HONEY AND THE FIRES, will appear in March 2006 from ABC Books (Australia). The above is an expanded version of an article that appeared in The Japan Times on August 14, 2005. Published at Japan Focus on August 14, 2005.



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Author, playwright, theatre director and translator, Roger graduated UCLA in political science before getting his MA in Russian Area Studies at Harvard. He has published 36 books in English and Japanese, including novels, plays, essays and translations from Japanese, Russian and Polish and his autobiography, "The Unmaking of an American". He is currently head of the Center for the Study of World Civilizations at Tokyo Institute of Technology. His website is accessible through this link. (http://www17.ocn.ne.jp/~h-uesugi/)He is a Japan Focus Associate. (http://www17.ocn.ne.jp/~h-uesugi/)