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Document type

Book chapter | Published version

(i. e. publisher-created published version, that has been (peer-) reviewed and copyedited; also known as: Version of Record (VOR), Final Published Version)

This version is available at

<https://doi.org/10.14279/depositonce-16775>

Citation details

Medzini, Meron (2021). Sugihara Chiune, Japan's only righteous among the nations: myths and reality. In S. Schüler-Springorum (Hrsg.), Jahrbuch für Antisemitismusforschung 30 (2021) (1. Aufl., Bd. 30, S. 227-239). Metropol.

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Sugihara Chiune, Japan's Only Righteous Among the Nations: Myths and Reality

In 1969, Aryeh Neshet, the Commercial Attaché at the Embassy of Israel in Tokyo, was able to track down the man who gave him a transit visa to Japan in Kaunas in the fall of 1940 – a document that saved his life. That person was Sugihara Chiune, then the Vice Consul of Japan in the Lithuanian city of Kaunas. Zerach Warhaftig, a minister in the Israeli government and another recipient of a Sugihara visa, was able to arrange for Sugihara to visit Israel to meet its prime minister and many of those he saved. The story spread and eventually led to the creation of several myths regarding Sugihara's activities during those weeks in July and August 1940. One of them was that he had long been a Judeophile. Another was that he risked his life and that of his family by granting visas to Japan to Polish Jews fleeing the invading Nazis. One myth was that he continued providing visas even after the consulate was closed and he moved to a hotel. One story tells of him throwing the visa stamp to the waiting Jews for them to stamp their own passports. A popular story was that he defied orders from his superiors in Tokyo, who objected to his actions; after the war ended, he was dismissed from the Japanese Foreign Ministry. Until his death in 1986, Sugihara gained many honors, highest among them the award of Righteous Among the Nations given by Yad Vashem in Jerusalem in 1985. There is a museum devoted to him in Yaotsu, the village in which Sugihara was born. There are commemorating plaques in Kaunas and Tsuruga as well as in the Holocaust Museum in Hiroshima. A number of documentary films were produced attempting to explain his motives; books were written about his deeds; a play and an opera were produced in Japan. His second wife wrote a biography, and his surviving son continues to promote his reputation as a leading Japanese humanitarian. Over the years, a number of questions have emerged that challenged some of these myths and sought to place Sugihara in a proper historic context without diminishing

what he accomplished – namely, issuing some 2160 family transit visas to Japan and thus saving the lives of some 6000 people. Most of them were Polish and Lithuanian Jews who would have otherwise perished in Nazi concentration camps or been exiled to Siberia by the Soviet regime that occupied Lithuania in the summer of 1940. This essay attempts to trace why it was so important for the government of Israel to recognize Sugihara as a Righteous Among the Nations and to what extent this act influenced the development of Japan-Israel relations. The effort to set the record straight will be based on the current research.

Before Kaunas

Sugihara Chiune was born in 1900 in the village of Yaotsu (Gifu Prefecture) not far from Nagoya in central Japan.¹ His father was a civil servant who worked as a tax collector. He had a normal childhood and went to middle school and high school in Nagoya. It is safe to assume that he generally had no contact with foreigners during his upbringing, let alone with Jews. He did well in school and was accepted by the prestigious Waseda University in Tokyo for his undergraduate studies. It is unclear what he studied, but his university work apparently did not satisfy him. We also do not know of any contact with foreigners in Tokyo or who his friends were there. In 1920, two years after he enrolled in the university, he answered an advertisement issued by the Japanese Foreign Ministry inviting candidates to study the Russian language at a school in Manchuria. This would change the course of his life, and for the next twenty-five years, he worked as an expert in Soviet affairs.

Japan and Russia had a very rocky relationship since the end of the 18th century. In 1905, Japan became the first Asian nation to defeat a European power when Russia sought a ceasefire to end the Russo-Japanese War. Following the October

1 There are several biographies of Sugihara. The most important are Anne Hoshiko Akabori, *The Gift: A Biographical Account of Japanese Diplomat Sugihara* (Sacramento: Edu-Comm Plus, 2005); Hillel Levine, *In Search of Sugihara: The Elusive Japanese Diplomat Who Risked His Life to Rescue 10,000 Jews from the Holocaust* (New York: The Free Press, 1996); Yukiko Sugihara, *Rokusen min no Inochi no Visa* [Visas for 6000 Jews: One Japanese Diplomat Aided the Jews] (Tokyo: Asahi Sonorama & Sacramento: Edu-Comm Plus, 1995); Seishiro Sugihara, *Chiune Sugihara and Japan's Foreign Ministry* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2001); Yutaka Taniuchi, *The Miracle Visas* (Jerusalem: Gefen, 2001).

1917 Bolshevik Revolution that toppled the Czarist regime in Russia, Japan sent some 72,000 troops to Siberia within the framework of an anti-Bolshevik intervention (together with Britain, France, and the United States). Its main base in Siberia was in Vladivostok, but its troops ranged all the way to Irkutsk and even further West. As a consequence of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, Japan now had to contend with a vast flow of White Russian refugees fleeing the newly created Soviet Union, who escaped to Manchuria and even further south to Shanghai. They brought with them anti-Bolshevik animosity and virulent antisemitism. They ascribed the evils of Marxism and Bolshevism to a Jewish plot and argued that the majority of Bolshevik leaders were Jewish.

The Japanese presence in Siberia created a growing need for its government and army to recruit Russian-speaking experts who would not only speak the language, but also learn Russian culture and mentality and be able to analyze the new Soviet regime's future actions. There was no shortage of Russian language teachers among the White Russian refugees. For a number of years, Sugihara studied both Russian and German in Harbin. In that city, he met several Jews, since Harbin already had a growing Jewish community numbering around 15,000 in the early 1920s, virtually all of them Russian speakers. Sugihara apparently did well in his studies and was asked by the head of the Japanese Army Special Branch, General Hashimoto Kingoro, to obtain intelligence on the Soviet Union from newly arrived Russian Jewish and non-Jewish refugees. In the mid-1920s, he married a Russian woman whose family may have harbored antisemitic sentiments. He also embraced the Russian Orthodox faith for a period. He divorced her in the 1930s and married Yukiko, his second wife and mother of his children. In the 1920s, he remained in Harbin and made his living by teaching Russian and German. After Japan occupied Manchuria in 1932, he was asked to join the newly formed Manchurian Affairs Office as a Russian specialist and remained with that body for the next five years.

Sugihara's next post was in the Foreign Ministry in Tokyo as a Russian affairs specialist. In 1937, the Japanese Foreign Ministry sought to post him to the Japanese embassy in Moscow, but the Russian government refused to accredit him. They were likely aware of his background. This led to the origin of the suspicion that Sugihara had worked for the Soviet intelligence apparatus all along, spying on Japan for them. This cannot be substantiated, verified, or confirmed by any

existing source. If this was indeed the case, Sugihara's presence in Moscow would serve the Russians no purpose. Instead, he was posted to the nearest country to the Soviet Union – Finland – and worked in the Japanese embassy in Helsinki as a Soviet affairs expert. While there, he caught the eye of the Japanese ambassador to Germany, General Oshima Hiroshi, who was always on the lookout for Soviet affairs specialists. Sugihara's knowledge of some German also counted in his favor.

Duty in Kaunas

It was at Oshima's suggestion that Sugihara was appointed Vice Consul at the Japanese consulate in Kaunas, Lithuania in the summer of 1939. His main task was to gather intelligence on the Russian intentions regarding Germany and on Germany's plans concerning Russia. This became acute after the signing of the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact on August 23, 1939. Shortly after his arrival in Kaunas, Germany invaded Poland and World War II broke out. The collapse of Poland within six weeks after the onset of the war led to the flight of thousands of Polish Jews to the nearest country possible: Lithuania. Germany and the Soviet Union agreed that Lithuania, although formally independent, was to be placed under the control of the Soviet Union. This was the second time in his life that Sugihara encountered Jewish refugees. The first was in Harbin during the early 1920s. The Jews fleeing Poland were now desperate to leave Lithuania for any country that would be willing to receive them. There were virtually no options, and in any case, the only route to escape from Lithuania was through the Soviet Union. Sugihara was quick to establish ties with the Polish underground as another source of information. He also allowed the Polish underground to use his diplomatic mail to pass information to the Polish government-in-exile in London.² The thousands of Jews who found themselves stranded in Kaunas desperately sought refuge elsewhere. The situation became even more acute after Germany invaded Holland, Belgium,

2 For the Polish connection, see John W.M. Chapman, "The Polish Connection, Japan and the Axis Alliance," in: *Proceedings of the British Association of Japanese Studies* (Sheffield: University of Sheffield, Centre of Japanese Studies, 1977), pp. 57–78; Ewa Palasz-Rutkowska, "Polish-Japanese Secret Cooperation During World War II: Sugihara Chiune and Polish Intelligence," in: *Japan Forum* 7, no. 2 (1995), pp. 285–316.

and France in May 1940, thus closing this route. After Italy joined the Axis a month later, the possibility of sailing from Italy to the Far East, the most used route until then, was effectively closed. This meant that the only way to leave Lithuania would be through the Soviet Union on the Trans-Siberian Railway to Vladivostok or to Manchuria, formally independent but in reality a Japanese puppet state.³ From there, refugees could proceed to China, Japan, America, or any other country that was willing to take them in.

The situation worsened after the Soviet Union entered Lithuania on June 15, 1940 and set out to eliminate all signs of local – and particularly Jewish – cultural, political, and social autonomy. The activities of Jewish, including Zionist, organizations were suspended, the study of Hebrew was banned, and private enterprises were nationalized. Among those who fled from Poland in late 1939 and found refuge in Vilnius was Menachem Begin (1913–1992), future prime minister of Israel. He was arrested by the Russians and exiled to Siberia where he was incarcerated for over a year before joining the Free Polish Army, which brought him to then Palestine in 1942.⁴ The massive anti-foreigner campaign launched by the Soviet Union affected Lithuanian Jews and they joined the Jewish refugees from Poland seeking haven elsewhere. In their despair, many of them turned to the Japanese consulate in Kaunas.

The reason they turned to Japan was the discovery that one could travel to the Dutch West Indies in the Caribbean where there was no need for an entry visa. Although the Dutch forces capitulated to the Germans in May 1940, the Dutch government-in-exile in London continued to exercise control over the colonies; chief among them were the Dutch East Indies (today's Indonesia) and the islands of Aruba, Curaçao, and others off the shores of South America as well as Dutch Surinam on the continent. The discovery was made by several Belgian Jews who learned about it from the Honorary Consul of the Netherlands in Kaunas, Jan Zwartendijk.⁵ Unlike Sugihara, he was not a professional diplomat

3 Ben-Ami Shillony, *Japan – A Personal Perspective* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Schocken Books, 2011), p. 55.

4 Menachem Begin, *White Nights: The Story of a Prisoner in Russia* (New York: Harper Collins, 1967).

5 Cnaan Liphshiz, "In Japan I Discovered the Unsung Dutch Hero behind Sugihara's Rescue of Jews," in: *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, January 9, 2018.

but a businessman who represented the Dutch conglomerate Phillips. The Dutch ambassador to Latvia L.P.J. de Dekker confirmed that there was no need for an entry visa to Curaçao. He authorized Zwartendijk to inform those interested that he could supply them with documents stating that they were proceeding to Curaçao (a place most Jews had never heard of) where admission would be solely at the discretion of the local governor.

But it turned out that the visa for Curaçao did not satisfy the Soviet government's requirements for when these passengers asked to travel to the Far East, the Russians demanded another visa, preferably a Japanese one. Since many of the Jewish refugees lacked any passport, some were issued with a travel document by the British Consul in Kaunas, Thomas Preston. Among the leaders of the refugees was Zerach Warhaftig, a major figure in the Mizrahi Zionist organization in Poland and onetime head of the Palestine office in Warsaw. He ended up in Canada and the United States before immigrating to then Palestine. In 1948, he was among the signatories of the Israeli Declaration of Independence and later was member of several cabinets in the Israeli government.⁶

At this point, Sugihara entered the picture. Years later, he recalled that one day in late July 1940, his consulate was mobbed by hundreds of Jews who sought an entry visa to Japan. If that could not be obtained, then they would be satisfied with a temporary transit visa issued by the Japanese consulate that would enable them to travel to the Far East via the Soviet Union. He later stated that his approach was humane – people were in distress, and it was incumbent upon all decent individuals of good will to help. Although this was before the onset of the Holocaust, he knew enough about Nazi policies regarding Jews and must have been aware of *Kristallnacht* on November 9, 1938.

But before issuing the visas, he had to obtain permission from his superiors in Tokyo. The correspondence between Sugihara and Tokyo remains intact in the archives of the Japanese Foreign Ministry. Tokyo's concern was who would cover the expenses in Japan for those holding Japanese transit visas and how long would they remain in Japan.⁷ The Jews applying for the Japanese transit visa were able

6 See Zerach Warhaftig, *Refugees and Survivors: Rescue Efforts During the Holocaust* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2001).

7 See Ryuta Mizuuchi, "Sugihara's Visas: Unknown Facts and Hidden Memories" (Lecture, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, April 13, 1987).

to assure Sugihara that their expenses in Japan would be covered either by the American Jewish organization the Joint Distribution Committee and/or by the Ashkenazi Jewish community of Kobe. That community was also able to obtain funds from the JDC in America for this purpose, as seen in the archives of the JDC in New York and Jerusalem.

The Japanese documents neither indicate that Sugihara defied his superiors nor issued the visas without their knowledge or authorization. They were fully aware of his actions which, at the time, were in line with the Japanese policy regarding Jewish refugees. That policy was decided upon as early as 1938 and stated that Jewish refugees would be treated similarly to other refugee groups. It can be safely assumed that Sugihara was fully aware of this policy determined at the highest level of the Japanese government.⁸ Sugihara made sure that Tokyo would be apprised of his issuing of visas. While his correspondence with the Japanese foreign ministry in Tokyo exists, his reports to the Japanese army and intelligence services regarding Germany and Russia's strategies vis-à-vis one another are missing. In August 1940, the Soviet authorities in Lithuania ordered the closure of all foreign embassies and consulates in the country no later than September 1, 1940. This applied to the Japanese Consulate in Kaunas. Sugihara now had to work under a deadline and did his best to write the visas, by hand, on the travel documents presented by the Jewish refugees. He was probably aware of the fact that the Jews had little intention of traveling to Curaçao or Aruba, but that did not deter him from issuing the visas.

Within several days in late July and August 1940, Sugihara reported to Tokyo that he had issued some 2160 family visas that covered some 6000 souls. They were valid for travel to Japan and a stay of three weeks. The American Joint Distribution Committee as well as another American Jewish organization called HIAS (Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society) sent funds to Lithuania to enable the Jewish refugees holding the Sugihara visas to purchase tickets for travel on the Trans-Siberian Railway to Vladivostok.⁹ The trip lasted between a week and ten days.

8 For the "Big Five" decision of December 1938, see Meron Medzini, *Under the Shadow of the Rising Sun: Japan and the Jews during the Holocaust Era* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2016), pp. 64–70.

9 For the history of the JDC, see Yehuda Bauer, *American Jewry and the Holocaust: The American Joint Distribution Committee* (Detroit: Wayne State University, 1981).

From Vladivostok, they sailed to the Japanese port of Tsuruga. For many years, the myth persisted that Sugihara continued to issue visas even after he closed the consulate and moved to a hotel. It was said that when he was already on the train out of Kaunas, he threw the visa stamp out of the railway carriage so that the Jews could use it after he was gone. He himself later vehemently denied this story.

After Kaunas

Once the Japanese consulate in Kaunas was closed, Japan attempted to post Sugihara to the Japanese consulate in Königsberg in East Prussia (now Kaliningrad in Russia) to continue his activities as an intelligence officer. Although Germany was newly allied with Japan in the Tripartite Treaty signed by Foreign Minister Matsuoka Yosuke on September 27, 1940, the Germans purportedly knew or at least suspected that Sugihara had contacts with the Polish underground and thus refused to approve him for the post.¹⁰ Instead, he worked in Berlin under Ambassador Oshima and later in the Japanese legation in Prague. In 1944, he was attached to the Japanese legation in Bucharest where the Russians found him when they occupied Romania in the summer of 1944. There is virtually no information on what he did in Bucharest from the summer of 1944 until he was repatriated to Japan in late 1945. Japan and the Soviet Union had a nonaggression pact, signed in April 1941, that lasted until two days after the first atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima on August 6, 1945. They abrogated the treaty and invaded Manchuria, North Korea, and the Kurile Islands and were about to invade Hokkaido when Japan surrendered on August 15, 1945.

Sugihara returned with his wife and children to Japan sometime in late 1947 or early 1948, together with the families of many Japanese diplomats who worked in Germany, its occupied territories, and Eastern European countries now occupied by the Red Army. Another myth has it that, upon returning to Japan, Sugihara was dismissed from the Japanese foreign ministry for disobeying his superiors by issuing visas to Jewish refugees in Kaunas. The truth is that he, together with most Japanese diplomats and officials in the foreign ministry, was no longer

10 Chapman, "The Polish Connection."

needed when Japan lost its sovereignty and became an occupied country with no foreign relations. These officials, including Sugihara, were given severance pay that enabled them to survive the post-war era. Many of them were later rehired by the Japanese foreign ministry once the country regained its independence in April 1952. Sugihara was evidently hired by a business firm that traded with the Soviet Union. His fluency in Russian served him well, and he was sent to represent the firm in Moscow, which he did for several years. There is little doubt that the Soviet authorities knew of his background and nevertheless allowed him to work in Russia for several years. This only added strength to the claim that he may have also worked for Soviet intelligence. There is no way to prove this unless the Soviets had admitted to this fact. For now, it remains undocumented speculation, as long as the Russian archives remain closed. After his return from Russia, Sugihara disappeared into obscurity until he was discovered by the Israeli diplomat. Few Japanese knew of his deeds, and very few Japanese were informed about the Holocaust. But the Jews his visas saved never forgot that they owed their lives to this obscure Japanese vice consul.

What happened to the Jews who received visas from Sugihara? In the fall of 1940 and winter of 1941, thousands of them traveled to Vladivostok and sailed to Japan, landing in the port city of Tsuruga where they were met by representatives of the Kobe Jewish community.¹¹ From Tsuruga, they traveled by train to Kobe and remained there until the summer of 1941. The Kobe Jewish community guaranteed the local Japanese authorities that they would provide for the refugees. But as funds ran low, the Kobe Ashkenazi community requested help from the Joint Distribution Committee in moving the refugees to Shanghai, then partly occupied by Japan. This was done shortly before and after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. 27,000 Jews were now under Japanese occupation in Shanghai and all of them survived the war. Some were relocated to a special designated area in the Hongkew section of that city; this applied only to Jews who held German, Austrian, and Czech passports. It did not apply to Jews who held Russian passports. Those who died did so due to old age and illness. Unlike the six million of their Jewish brethren who perished in the death camps and other places in Nazi-

11 Akira Kitade, *Visas for Life and the Epic Journey: How the Sugihara Survivors Reached Japan* (Tokyo: Chobunsha, 2014).

occupied Europe, those who spent the war years in Shanghai survived. After the war, many went to newly established Israel, while some went to the United States, Canada, or Australia. Some even went back to Germany.¹²

Righteous Gentile

At the behest of Minister Warhaftig, Sugihara and his family were invited to visit Israel, where he met the Prime Minister of Israel Levi Eshkol (1894–1969) and several of those to whom he issued visas. His son was granted a scholarship to study at the Hebrew University. At the time, few raised the possibility of awarding Sugihara the title of Righteous Among the Nations. On the face of it, he did not merit this recognition. He did not hide Jews in his home. He did not provide Jews with food or shelter. He did not smuggle Jews out of war-torn Europe. He was not involved in helping the Jewish resistance. He did not forge documents to help Jews. While the Sugihara visas were genuine, he did not risk his own life or that of his family. He did not disobey his superiors, nor was he punished for his deeds. Why was it decided nevertheless to award him this title in 1985, when he was already too old and sick to make the trip back to Jerusalem and receive it in person?

In 1953 the Knesset (Israel's Parliament) adopted the Yad Vashem Law, defining, among other items, who was entitled to the title Righteous Among the Nations (sometimes also known as Righteous Gentiles). The basic criteria for non-Jews to receive this honor include actively saving Jews or being involved in saving Jews; risking one's life or that of one's family or position through one's deeds; never asking for or receiving any financial benefits for this act. Hiding Jews from the Nazis, smuggling Jews to safety, or issuing them with false documents were examples of

12 There are many books on the Jewish community in Shanghai during the Second World War. Among the best are Gao Bei, *Shanghai Sanctuary: Chinese and Japanese Policy toward European Jewish Refugees during World War II* (New York: Oxford UP, 2013); Irene Eber, *Voices from Shanghai: Jewish Exiles in Wartime China* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 2008); Irene Eber, *Wartime Shanghai and the Jewish Refugees from Central Europe. Survival, Existence and Identity in Multi-Ethnic City* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012); David Kranzler, *Japanese, Nazis and Jews: The Jewish Refugee Community of Shanghai, 1938–1945* (New York: Yeshiva UP, 1976).

acts that could earn this honor. Since 1953, some 27,000 people worldwide have been recognized as Righteous Among the nations. Sugihara remains the only Japanese national ever to be recognized with this honor. What led to this act?

There were two major reasons why his name was brought up before the Yad Vashem commission that determined who would receive this honor. The first had to do with the state of Japan-Israel relations. The second issue was rising anti-semitism in Japan in the 1980s. Israel and Japan established diplomatic relations in December 1952. The Israeli legation in Tokyo was the first Israeli diplomatic mission on the Asian continent. Several weeks before Japan regained its independence, it circulated a letter to various governments announcing the resumption of its sovereignty and seeking to establish normal diplomatic relations. In Israel, there were some doubts if Japan, once an ally of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, should be accorded this honor so soon after the end of the Second World War. Foreign Minister Moshe Sharett thought that it could wait. The Israeli diplomats who dealt with Israel's relations with Asia thought otherwise and were able to persuade Prime Minister Ben-Gurion to approve this idea. While Sharett was overseas, Ben-Gurion authorized Israeli diplomats to inform Japan that it would be happy to comply with their request. On April 20, 1952, the entire Israeli cabinet approved this move, and a minister plenipotentiary was appointed and presented his credentials to Emperor Hirohito in December 1952. Japan claimed budgetary difficulties and decided that its minister in Ankara would be in charge of affairs in Tel Aviv. Some years later, Japan opened a legation in Tel Aviv and in 1964, both countries raised the status of their representation to embassies. But the relations were still chilly. Japan had to consider the Arab threat of retaliation against any country that established close economic ties with Israel. Given the massive dependence of Japan on oil from Arab and Middle Eastern countries, Japan had to tread very softly on trade relations with Israel. Japan was admitted to the United Nations in 1956 and has since voted consistently against Israel on all major issues. While Israeli ministers visited Japan – notably Foreign Minister Golda Meir in 1962 and Abba Eban in 1967 – these visits were not reciprocated. Right-wing Japanese groups criticized Israel for being too close to the United States, while left-wing groups attacked the Israeli policy of relying on the United States for economic and military aid. Left-wing Japanese groups attacked Israel for becoming, according to various sources, a nation that possessed nuclear capability. Japanese airlines boycotted Israel and

refused to open direct routes to the Jewish state. Until 2020, the Israeli national airline was not allowed to fly to Japan. After the 1967 Six Days War, Israel became an occupying power incurring the wrath of left-wing Japanese organizations.

While political and economic ties were at a standstill, cultural ties began to flourish. Japan granted scholarships to a growing number of Israeli graduate students and Japanese studies were being offered at three Israeli universities. But many polls taken in Japan indicated that virtually all the Japanese people knew nothing of the Holocaust and therefore were not aware of the need for a state for the Jewish people. This was somewhat improved by the Eichmann Trial held in Jerusalem in 1961–1962, which was extensively covered by the Japanese media. By granting Sugihara this award, the Israeli government may have thought it would help explain to the Japanese people why there was a need for a Jewish state and what preceded the establishment of the State of Israel.

The second reason was growing signs of antisemitic sentiments in Japan, as seen in several books that appeared in the 1980s, effectively denying the Holocaust. Among them were Masami Uno's *If You Understand the Jews, You will Understand Japan* (1986) and *The Economic Strategy of the Jews* (1992). He claimed that the Holocaust was invented by the Jews to justify the establishment of Israel and to obtain reparations and restitution from Germany.¹³ The Israeli government thought that one way to combat this tide of antisemitism in a country where less than 2000 Jews lived at the time would be to find a way to explain the horrors of the Holocaust, the dangers of antisemitism and Holocaust denial, and the need for a Jewish state. The Sugihara story would be the basis for explaining to the Japanese people what happened in those dark days. While the deliberations of the Commission for the Designation of the Righteous are secret, it can be safely assumed that, in addition to the demands of the Sugihara visas holders living in Israel and abroad, the challenges of Israel-Japan relations weighed heavily on those who made the decision.

It can also be safely assumed that the Japanese government was quite satisfied with this award, as it showed a Japanese diplomat in a very positive light and

13 Medzini, *Under the Shadow*, pp. 162–166. See also Rotem Kowner, "Tokyo Recognizes Auschwitz: The Rise and Fall of Holocaust Denial in Japan, 1989–1999," in: *Journal of Genocide Research* 3, no. 2 (2001), pp. 257–272.

help mitigate their image as former members of the Axis and after the atrocities committed by Japanese soldiers in China in 1937. This would also improve its relations with the American Jewish community that helped Israel fight against Japan's adherence to the rules of the Arab economic boycott against Israel. Lithuania also benefitted from Sugihara's feats in Kaunas in 1940. While many Lithuanians actively took part in murdering Jews, the Sugihara story could be used to improve their place in history. While on a state visit to Lithuania in January 2017, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe visited what is now called the Sugihara House in Kaunas. On a state visit to Japan, the Prime Minister of Lithuania laid a wreath on Sugihara's grave.

Sugihara was presented the award in Tokyo by the Israeli Ambassador Amnon Ben-Yochanan in 1985. He died a year later. He did not live to see the turnabout in Israel-Japan relations; the flourishing economic, cultural, and scientific relations; the many diplomatic visits; and the signing of various agreements that raised their ties to an unprecedented level. Sugihara's humane actions in 1940 – his good instincts that helped him to save lives, not be apathetic to their fate – played a key role in the vast improvement of ties between Israel and Japan and even those between the Japanese people, the people of Israel, and world Jewry.