CASABLANCA OF THE NORTH: REFUGEES AND RESCUERS IN KAUNAS 1939–1940

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REFUGEES: BETWEEN MYTH AND REALITY

SIMONAS STRELCOVAS

Šiauliai University, Lithuania

SUMMARY. The number of memorial sites dedicated to Ch. Sugihara in Lithuania is growing every year. This figure is particularly well known in Kaunas and Vilnius (the main cities of Lithuania). The memorialization process of Ch. Sugihara takes place in Japan as well. Does this enhanced attention to Sugihara in both countries allow us to speak about memorialization links between Japan and Lithuania? Is there any opportunity to carry out studies in order to investigate activities dedicated to his remembrance? To this end, we have to research the actions taken in order to create Ch. Sugihara's image in the sources of historical, cultural and communicating memory. But first, we have to find out what was going on in 1940 and try to answer very important questions. During the first weeks of World War II, while the German-Polish front line was proceeding east, thousands of people were moving towards unoccupied regions. The refugees might be described as a large mixed mass, in which Polish and Jewish refugees represented the absolute majority. The civil refugees and internees came to Lithuania escaping from the war, and this decision was not based on free will, but on a natural survival instinct. The archival sources provide information that some of the Polish underground organizations had very closely connected with foreign embassies and consulates. The network of underground covered Warsaw, Berlin, Stockholm, Paris, London and Tokyo. However, after June 15, 1940, the situation changed drastically. When the Jewish refugees fell under the Soviet influence for the second time, they had an intention to leave Lithuania which was being annexed. The Jewish refugees began to seek for alternative ways of leaving Lithuania which was losing its independence. The Japanese diplomat, who served as Vice-Consul for the Empire of Japan in Lithuania, Ch. Sugihara was the rescuer who helped refugees leave Lithuania. Despite the fact that many years had passed since summer 1940, there are still too many unanswered questions. The circumstances of the connection between Polish underground and Japanese consulate are still unknown, as well as the role of links between the foreign embassies in Kaunas (Lithuania), the countries they were representing and the refugees who tried to escape in the summer 1940. The answers would be like material to produce bricks in order to create a palace of memory and enable us to speak about the memorialization links between Japan and Lithuania.

KEYWORDS: Ch. Sugihara, Lithuania, Refugees, World War II, Memory.

INTRODUCTION

Since the last decade of the 20th century many different articles have been published about the Vice-Consul of the Japanese Consulate in Kaunas, Lithuania, Chiune Sugihara, who saved 6,000 Jewish refugees during the Holocaust. The period when the diplomat was living in Kaunas attracted broad interest after 1984, when he was awarded an official title of Righteous Among the Nations by Yad Vashem. But it should be noted that the greater part of the essays, written after the aforementioned event, could be considered literary laurels rather than detailed historical research. Lack of factual coincidence and basic knowledge in history is particularly characteristic to Ch. Sugihara's online dossier[1]. Moreover, there is still a lack of in-depth analysis of the activities carried out by the Japanese consul in Kaunas. In this article we will mainly discuss about the connection between the past (facts) and the memory (history). Therefore, it is vitally important to understand how Ch. Sugihara is presented in Lithuania. Over the past 5–10 years the interest in Ch. Sugihara's activity has grown considerably. In Lithuania, historians have dealt extensively with the Holocaust over the past two decades, but only a few studies have examined the state of Jewish refugees and their rescue in the summer 1940. Regina Žepkaitė was the first to discuss this issue in her monograph in 1990, focusing on Vilnius question after Lithuania had signed the treaty with the Soviet Union in 1939.[2] However, neither Sugihara nor the Dutch consul in Kaunas, Jan Zwartendijk, are mentioned in this research. Sugihara first appeared in Lithuanian historians' study as late as 2001[3] and later, in 2003.[4] It was only in 2010, however, when a monograph devoted to the issue of refugees in Lithuania in 1939–1940 focused on Ch. Sugihara visa granting, as well as on the situation of the Jewish refugees in Lithuania and their subsequent departure in 1940.[5]

Ch. Sugihara became an historical figure known all over the world, for his actions that saved several thousands of Jewish people. At first glance the statements, such as "to save Jews" or to issue "visas for life" are naturally related the Holocaust theme. It is the way of common thinking, especially in Western Europe. But

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[1] Some examples see: <https://www.facinghistory.org/rescuers/chiune-sugihara>, <http://www.jewishpost.com/shalom/Chiune-Sugihara-The-Japanese-Schindler.html>, <http://remember.org/imagine/sugihara>, <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/01/24/chiune-sugihara-japanese--jews-holocaust_n_2528666.html> etc.

[2] Žepkaitė R. *Vilniaus istorijos atkarpa 1939–1940*. Vilnius: Mokslas, 1990.

[3] Ivanovas B. Chiune (Sempo) Sugiharos veiklos Kaune 1939–1940 m. probleminiai aspektai. *Genocidas ir rezistencija*, t. 9, 2001, 7–14.

[4] Strelcovas S. Chiune Sugihara ir Janas Zwartendijkas – Pasaulio Tautų Teisuoliai. Istorinės peripetijos tarp sovietinių struktūrų, žydų pabėgėlių ir jų gelbėtojų. *Genocidas ir rezistencija*, t. 14, 2003, 44–50.

[5] Strelcovas S. *Antrojo pasaulinio karo pabėgėliai Lietuvoje*. Šiauliai: Šiaulių universiteto leidykla, 2010.

historically educated person finds the Holocaust in Lithuania in summer 1940 a rather complicated topic. It is worth emphasising the differences between the concepts of "assisting to rescue" and "rescue". In this research we are going to focus on the effort to assist and rescue Jews and the reasons that induced or determined this process rather than the rescue of refugees as a final result.

First of all, we are going to mark some milestones. We have to raise a number of questions, the answers to which could lead us to a better understanding of the entire political situation in the year 1939–1940, and particularly the situation of the refugees in Lithuania at the time. Secondly, only the analysis of the realities of those days could get us closer to the awareness of Ch. Sugihara's contribution that changed the direction of the refugees' fate. The goal of this article is to answer the following questions: 1) Who were Jewish refugees who arrived to Lithuania in 1939–1940? 2) How did the Soviet officials deal with the refugees and potential escapers from the Soviet "freedom"? 3) What kind of place was Kaunas and/or Lithuania in 1939–1940?

LITHUANIA AND REFUGEES IN 1939–1940

We should note that Ch. Sugihara was a professional diplomat. In the autumn of 1939 Ch. Sugihara – a relatively young and promising Japanese diplomat – was sent to Kaunas, which then was an especially convenient place for all foreign intelligence personnel in the context of changeable European geopolitical relations. It seems that August 23,1939, the day when the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact was signed between the Soviet Union and Germany, was an unexpected turn in the foreign policy of Japan, because very soon after the signature of this contract Japan decided to establish its consulate in Kaunas. After Poland was shared by two totalitarian regimes, Lithuania was a neutral state between Germany and the USSR. Of course, according to Ch. Sugihara, who expressed his view in an interview to Lithuanian press, the official reason for such a decision was the development of economic relations between Lithuania and Japan.[6] After the start of military operations in September 1, 1939, a huge amount of refugees very quickly left former Poland for Lithuania. In general, migration increased in all war-torn territories. After Germany invaded Poland, part of the Polish Jews began to move to eastward in order to run away from the advancing German army. The Soviet "demarche on freedom" to Poland, which began in September 17 1939, suspended the retreat of

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[6] Svečias iš tekančios Saulės krašto. Pasikalbėjimas su Japonijos konsulu P. Chiunė Sugihara. *Sekmadienis*, 1939 lapkričio 12.

Jewish refugees into the eastern part of Poland. No matter what goals or aspirations led the refugees to move to Vilnius (escape from the Nazis or Soviets), they all were united by one common trait – they came from the territories occupied by totalitarian regimes. It must be noted that the refugees who crossed yet virtual Lithuanian-Soviet Union border were no longer endangered by the Nazis. Therefore, the explanation of the reason for their departure to Lithuania could be rather simple – they were not impressed by the life perspective proposed by the Soviets.

The number of refugees that entered Lithuania in 1939 was rather dynamic. In December 1939, there were 17,297 refugees of Polish nationality and 13,469 refugees of Jewish nationality. In February 1940, there were 12,039 Polish refugees and 10,785 Jewish refugees, while in the summer 1940, especially July, which was crucial to the hero of this article, there were 11,034 Jewish refugees[7]. As can be seen, the numbers were rather dynamic than constant, while the migration process was permanent. What is known about the gender, age and other features of the refugees? A contingent of Jewish refugees included 75% men, 20% women and only 5% children. There were significant differences between the gender proportions and family status of the Jews who came to Lithuania and the rest of war refugees. Adult men constituted the largest part of over 10,000 refugees registered in Vilnius by March 1940 (8010), there were only about 2,000 women and less than 700 children.[8] Obviously, families represented a very small part of Jewish refugees. In fact, such an odd prevalence of single gender refugees can be easily explained – the majority of them were students of *yeshiva*s, worldwide Jewish religious schools. In a pre-war period, Jewish youths came from all over the world to study religious sciences at *yeshiva*s of Mir, Łomża, Kamenetz, Grodno and Pinsk in Poland. Therefore, it is not surprising that the students studying religious sciences, as well as their lecturers, could not expect anything good from the Soviets. Thus, after the news that Vilnius was going to become a part of an independent and still neutral Lithuania, the majority of them linked their future route to Lithuania. The first who reached Vilnius were students from Kletzk *yeshiva*.[9] They arrived in October 14, 1939. Mir *yeshiva* students reached Vilnius in October 16 and then other groups of students followed their example.[10] After Vilnius Region was transferred to Lithuania in October 28, 1939, agreements on the new borders between Lithuania and the Soviet Union were made and new rules were set, according to which

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[7]   1940 April, Number of refugees in Vilnius, New Vilna, Lentvaris. Lithuanian Central State Archive (LCSA), f. 383, ap. 7, b. 2280, l. 100.

[8]   *Ibid.*, b. 2280, l. 100.

[9]   Zuroff E. *Rescue via the far East: the attempt to save Polish rabbis and yeshivah students, 1939–1940*; <http://motlc.wiesenthal.com/site/pp.asp?c=gvKVLcMVIuG&b=394985> [2016 02 15].

[10]   *Ibid.*

it was more difficult to cross the border. In November 1939, it was announced that the residents of the territories occupied by the Soviets would be granted Soviet citizenship. That is why the Jews who had already planned to leave the Soviet "paradise" started their emigration. Many of the Jewish refugees who came to Lithuania were Zionists. The attitude of the Soviet structures towards Zionism was negative, thus it was not surprising that the young people arrived to Vilnius upon the instructions received by coordinating committees. Even after introducing tighter border controls, the flow of refugees to Lithuania continued until June 1940.

There were two main roads to enter Lithuania – through the Vilnius district (eastern border with the Soviet Union) and through Suvalkai triangle (road leading directly to Nazi Germany). According to archival sources dated December 1939, more than 86% Jewish refugees entered Lithuania through the eastern part of the country and 13.3% arrived in the country through Suvalkai triangle.
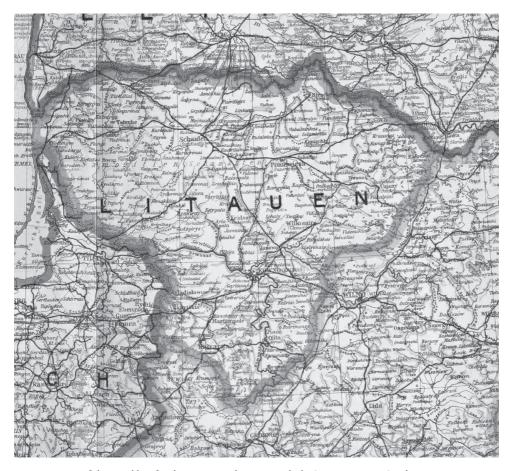

Figure 1. *Map of the Republic of Lithuania prior the treaty with the Soviet Union in October 1939*

We have plenty of information about the refugees and the social welfare policy that was applied toward them. At the time it was expensive to take care of refugees, as it is now. Lithuania, with the financial support of foreign foundations, had spent a total of 8 million litas on refugees.[11]

It is highly important to mention that the process of Jewish emigration from Lithuania during the period as of autumn 1939 to winter and spring 1940 was slow. Very, very slow. There were individual attempts to obtain Palestine visa. As we know today, it was almost impossible to get to the country. In April Lithuania reached an agreement with the Soviets. According to it, the Soviets agreed to let Jewish refugees through its territory (as far as Odessa port), but only those who were lucky and had entry visas to Palestine or went to other destinations. But the situation changed in July 1940.
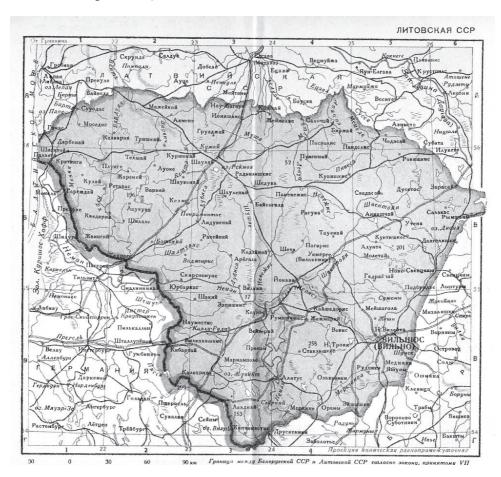

Figure 2. *Map of the Soviet Lithuanian Republic after Soviet occupation in 1940*

[11]   26 July 1940 . Charity for refugees and newcommers. LCSA, f. 757, ap. 9, b. 6, l. 68.

None of the literature sources available up to date reveal that Ch. Sugihara must have issued Japanese visas to Jewish refugees up to mid of June 1940. It is important, because Lithuania till June 15 was an independent state, with its own legislation. So we can draw a conclusion that at the time there were no obstacles for Jews living in Lithuania, who were willing to emigrate, or at least there were no better options available. But the situation changed fundamentally after June 15, 1940. That very day, after an ultimatum was issued by the Soviet government to Lithuania, the Soviets began the occupation. After Jewish refugees came under the Soviets control for the second time, they were interested in leaving Lithuania, which was already threatened by annexation. The main destination targets for the majority of emigrants were still Palestine and the USA, but the binding quotas to enter these countries and the lack of time were the factors which induced them to look for alternative ways to leave Lithuania, already losing its independence.

Interestingly, but the Dutch colony was not a "white spot" for the Lithuanian authorities. After the German invasion of the Netherlands, the Dutch ambassador to the Baltic States L.P.J. de Decker sent some Notes to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Lithuania. Hereby he proposed to develop economic relations with Dutch colonies, in particular Curacao and Surinam.[12] It is difficult to say whether closer relations were finally established with these Dutch colonies. But it is important to note that virtually on the eve of the events in question Lithuanian officials had found out the final destination related to the visas issued by J. Zwartendijk – the Dutch West Indies – from the Dutch officials themselves. We can hypothetically assume that after a few months, when the Soviets were taking over the Lithuanian authorities, those documents were not completely forgotten. Under such circumstances, the number of visas being issued by Ch. Sugihara could cause less suspicion or fault-finding among the Soviet security officials than in the case if they had not heard anything about the colonies of the Netherlands, which would have been occupied by Germans.

So, the first visas were issued by Ch. Sugihara in the second half of July. The news quickly spread among Jewish refugees and soon visas became very popular. In a relatively short period of time – the process of visa issuance lasted a bit longer than a month – more than two thousand visas were issued for the Jews wishing to emigrate. Thus, it is reasonable to claim that the Jews were forced (or, to be more precise, made their own decision) to leave Lithuania not so much by anti-Semitic German policy and its manifestations in the occupied part of Poland, but by the events that were taking place in Lithuania. The prospects of Sovietized Lithuania,

[12]   1940 March. The letter by the Ambassador of the Netherlands to Minister of Foreign affairs of Lithuania. LCSA, f. R-1019, ap. 55, b. 10, l. 9–12.

apparently, did not satisfy the Jewish refugees, particularly remembering a bit exclusive status of the Jews who had emigrated in comparison to all Lithuanian Jews. The course of the events, that started in the beginning of World War II and ended with the occupation of Lithuania by the Bolsheviks, supports the hypothesis that the emigrants tried to escape the Soviet future. Seeing a successful development of the friendship between new partners – division of Poland, the Baltic States were becoming more and more dependent on Moscow and finally lost even fictitious independence – anyone could hardly believe that a new conflict will arise so soon. Such aspect was also fostered by the press of that time, which focused on then existing warm and friendly German-Soviet relations.

Being aware of the Soviet nomenclature's attitude towards the Zionist movement and the Orthodox Jewish organizations (the aforementioned yeshiva students), we may assume that in the course of the Soviet reorganizations that were taking place in Lithuania, membership of such organizations could cause another jurisdictional process better known as "Trials of the Enemies of the People."

As was already mentioned, Ch. Sugihara was as a favourable alternative for those who failed to receive visas to Palestine and the United States. By issuing visas J. Zwartendijk and Ch. Sugihara green-lighted the Jewish emigration to the east. In other words, potential "enemies of the soviet people" were able to travel unhindered throughout the territory of the Soviet Union as far as Vladivostok. But we should not forget that would-be emigrants, who received visas issued by J. Zwartendijk and Ch. Sugihara, also needed to get exit visas from the Soviets. As a result, the case of every such "candidate" was verified by security services and only if major allegations were not grounded, the person was able to leave.

There is no strict agreement between historians with respect to the question of the closure of all foreign representative offices in Kaunas during the summer of occupation. There is a nice hypothesis that only Ch. Sugihara was allowed to stay in Kaunas a bit longer and he allegedly used this period of time to issue transit visas. However, this fact is somewhat at odds with historical reality. In July 1940, foreign representative officers were asked to leave Kaunas up to mid-August. It is likely that even the Soviets realized that such term was too short as they decided to extend the term of departure up to 1 September, when such urgency caused the wave of discontent in the embassies and consulates. However, some exceptions were made – the term was extended up to September 5 to the consulate of Japan, the embassies of Great Britain, USA and France.[13] French and British envoys could base their reasoning on the challenges related to transit visas from Germany. Today, it would be difficult to say what reasons for such delay were indicated by the representatives

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[13]   1940 August, Letter about foreign representatives in Kaunas. LCSA, f. R-1019, ap. 1, b. 2, l. 9.

of the USA and Japan. Anyway, it does not change the essence. In addition, it's rather interesting to note that the consensus regarding the Japanese consul's last days spent in Kaunas has not been reached so far. The list of the visas issued by Ch. Sugihara presented in the Holocaust Memorial Museum reveals that the last visas were issued on 26 August.[14] The fact naturally raises a question: "Why there is no data on the visas issued until 5 September?" the answer to which is a matter of future research.

SHORT DOSSIER ON KAUNAS IN 1939–1940

For historians (not Lithuanians) Lithuania means one of former territories in the ex-Soviet Union area. What does it mean? Most often, such insufficiently informed foreigners may view Lithuania through the prism of surviving myths: grey uniformed buildings, dirty streets, all inhabitants are fluent in Russian and live like Russians … The problem is that the majority of researchers have never been in Lithuania and/or used secondary sources for their studies on this country. Kaunas in 1920s – 1930s was a very specific city. It was a provisional capital of Lithuania. How big was Kaunas in 1930s? It was not a large city. The provisional capital was a medium-sized city, or rather one of the smaller European cities, with population of a little more than 150,000. 12 cinemas, 8 museums, 25–30 hotels and plenty of coffeehouses and restaurants. The city was multinational (the majority of Kaunas residents were Lithuanians, but there were many Jews, Polish and Germans). The younger generation had no ability to speak or understand the Russian language; it was an advantage of those who were born during the period of the Tsarist Russia (by the way, the situation is similar today. Many young people do not speak or understand Russian at all). On the other hand, since Lithuanians emigrated or migrated during this period to and back from the United States, English was a more relevant foreign language, probably in parallel with German. The autumn of 1939 marked great changes. Vilnius became an integral part of the Republic of Lithuania. The Soviet Army garrisons moved into Lithuania's territory. And the mission of Kaunas as a capital seemed to be accomplished. Of course, not everything went smoothly, there were plenty of problems (the refugees were not the most important one) with integration of Vilnius, but most problems were solved at the beginning of the summer 1940.

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[14] Levine H. *In search of Sugihara: The Elusive Japanese Diplomat Who Risked His Life to Rescue 10,000 Jews from the Holocaus.* Boston, 1996, 153.

Finally, we must understand that the summer of 1940 was exclusive. Kaunas, as well as Vilnius and the entire Lithuania, became occupied by the Soviets. This circumstance is viewed by some authors as non-essential. In fact, it is crucial. Actually, what really matters is not the occupation itself, but rather the occupant's behaviour, i.e., we should not only realise the fact itself, but to feel the atmosphere of the summer 1940. To smell it in the air. The Soviet terror, the communist party, the destruction of culture and economic life. This was the end of everything that Lithuania had been creating for the last 22 years before the occupation.

EPILOGUE

What happened to Jews who entered into the Soviet "bright future" in 1940–1941? There are plenty of published archival sources about Jews, who were forced into exile to Siberia or Kazakhstan in June 1941. Also, a very important circumstance is usually mentioned that there were many Jews among those people who were arrested by the Soviets. Actually, the percentage of the arrested Jews, bearing in mind the whole population of Jews in Lithuania, was bigger than the percentage of the arrested Lithuanians. 13.5% of Jews were sent to exile and 11.8% were sent to camps to compare with the percentage of the Lithuanian population. (8.3%). But it very important to understand and highlight that among the sentenced Jews there were many Jewish refugees from former Poland – almost 25–27%. The conditions during 1941–1945 were particularly horrible, and those who died during this period consist 70% of the total number of those who were killed during the whole period of exile carried out by the Soviets. Only one out of four people came back from exile. The Soviet occupation was a catastrophe not only for Lithuanian society. It was a new turn in the life of refugees.

CONCLUSIONS

After Vilnius Region was transferred to the Republic of Lithuania in the autumn of 1939, about 10,000 Jewish refugees found a temporary shelter in Lithuania. The majority of the Jewish immigrants consisted of students of *yeshiva*s and Zionists. Being aware of a purely negative attitude of the Soviet structures towards Zionism, Lithuania, being an independent state at that time, was the only rational choice for them. After the Soviets occupied Lithuania in June 1940, the situation of the autumn of 1939 repeated itself and the Jewish refugees, who once escaped from the

Soviet "freedom", had to look for new ways to escape. Without the support rendered by Ch. Sugihara most of these people would have been exiled to the Soviet Siberia.

Today, the figure of Ch. Sugihara is world-famous and well-known in Lithuania too. But it is important to mention that in this case, as sometimes happens, the history is separated from the past and lives its own life. However, the refugees, their fate and Ch. Sugihara are very import to modern Lithuania's historical narrative. Actually, all of them are more important than it may look at first glance. The happy end for thousands of refugees and Ch. Sugihara's activity in 1940 summer are the positive side of the story that happened during the summer when Lithuania lost its independence, likesome bright light in the shadows of war and horror.

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