

***CONSIDERING OTHER CHOICES:  
CHIUNE SUGIHARA'S RESCUE OF POLISH JEWS***

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There are two men on a beach at sunrise. As one walks toward the other, he steps over dozens of starfish that have been tossed onto the sand by the tide and far down the beach, he witnesses the other man picking up starfish and tossing them back into the water. Looking behind him and before him, he calculates the number of creatures stranded and marvels at the futility of the other man's efforts. When he reaches the man busily saving starfish, he cannot contain the frustration he feels. "Sir, don't you see that there are hundreds, even thousands of starfish here? You can't possibly save them all. What earthly difference can this make?" he asks. The other gentleman only bends and picks up another starfish and tosses it into the surf and says, "It made a big difference to that one."

For every Holocaust, there are witnesses, survivors who remain to tell their stories, and people of conscience who rise above the barbarity and fear and choose to save lives, even of people unlike themselves and at considerable personal risk. That is the hope. In the 1930's and 40's, the tragedy of the European Holocaust and the Sino-Japanese War collided in Japanese Occupied Shanghai. While scholars still debate the numbers of those killed in the greatest acts of human aggression of that time—the Nazi "final solution," the full-scale war with China and the Rape of Nanking, Russian pogroms, and the atomic holocausts in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the histories most of our students learn

by rote focus on conflicts battle by battle and name great generals and politicians, but frequently omit those who saved lives by force of will. Chiune (Sempo) Sugihara, one such person of conscience, is responsible for providing transit visas to thousands of Polish Jews in Lithuania, Jews who would become part of a swelling Jewish refugee population in Shanghai and in Japan itself, primarily in Kobe. Sugihara's choice in providing means of escape, against the Japanese government's order, suggests that not only he, but other Jews, Japanese, and Chinese in the cycle of events in which he found himself, made it possible for those rescued from European Holocaust to survive and to emigrate from harm's way.

Questions abound as to why Japanese Occupied China would become a refuge for threatened Europeans even as it proved far from a safe haven for native Chinese. Pursuits of some of these questions focus us on Japan's policy regarding Jews in the 30's and 40's; some lend greater insight into definitions and acts of heroism and of anti-Semitism that nonetheless saved the lives of thousands of refugees; some help us consider whether Sugihara and those like him are extraordinary beings or ordinary men in extraordinary circumstances making difficult decisions; and some force us to make meaning of the questions we choose to ask and the answers we choose to find, to designate ourselves as actors or responders, problem-solvers or victims, individual citizens of the world or extensions of our respective governments. Our questions and our answers

ultimately guide us as teachers and as students in the world, and help us examine not only the dynamics of holocausts, but of singular citizens of the world, like Chiune Sugihara, who see a broader and more peaceful possibility for conflict resolution, a lesson that may be particularly applicable as we consider the ramifications of our current international policies and wars on terrorism.

First, a bit a background. The Shanghai Jewish refugees of WWII were not the first Jews in East Asia, nor in Japan, China, and Manchuria. The Russian Revolution and subsequent pogroms sent thousands to Manchuria, in Harbin, Dairen, and further south into Shanghai and Hong Kong. As Japan took control of Manchuria, renaming it Manchukuo, reprisals of local White Russians against Jews in Manchuria sent hundreds to Shanghai into the International Settlement and French Concession of that city. [Note: After the Opium War, China allowed these foreign concessions both in Shanghai and elsewhere in China. The International Settlement was mostly American and British while the French Concession also took in Russians. Shortly there would be a Japanese Settlement largely in the Hongkew area.] While there were small pockets of Jewry within Japan itself, in Kobe, Yokohama, and Tokyo, most had blended into the community around them as traders and businessmen. Although German Jews saw their lives worsen with Hitler's policies, and in the first 5 of his years in power, 140,000-150,000 Jews emigrated from Germany (Kranzler 27), many Europeans believed that Hitler would not last. Kristallnacht, or the Night of Broken Glass, November 10-11 of 1938, served as the wake up call for Austrian

and German Jews, and the invasion of Poland and German-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact, for Polish Jews that to flee would be the only means of survival. But to where? International doors began to close rather than open to refugees, and the German-Japanese Anti-Comintern Pact of 1936 and the Tripartite Pact with Germany, Italy, and Japan in 1940 made most refugees wary of escaping into the realms of any friends of Nazis. Still, hope, Nazi persecution of Jews, and the international failure of other countries to offer adequate refuge or aid would render Shanghai and, for a time, Kobe, the few sanctuaries still available to those who sought to save their lives. And the Japanese, Germany's ally, accepted these refugees with a different plan in mind.

The Jewish presence in Nagasaki and Yokohama was 100 families by 1905, but the Yokohama Jews moved to Kobe after an earthquake in 1923 and were the approximately 25 families that would host these first Polish arrivals from Vilna in 1940 (Kranzler 34). The Shanghai Jewish community prior to 1937, already divided as to Ashkenazi and Sephardim, from previous arrivals of Russian and Baghdadi Jews, was also about 100 families (Kranzler 33) with schools, hospitals, and so forth, most living in the International settlement and within the French Concessions of Shanghai. According to the 1936 census of Shanghai, among the 1 ½ million Chinese were 20,000 Japanese; 15,000 Russians; 9,000 British; 5,000 non-Jewish Germans and Austrians; 4,000 Americans; and 2500 French (Kranzler 42). By 1937, this population was estimated to have risen to 3-

4 million, among them thousands of Jewish refugees from Germany, Austria, Italy, and Poland (Kranzler 43), with more coming. [Note: After the resumption of the Sino-Japanese hostilities, thousands of Chinese refugees also flooded the city, resulting in increased hardship and strain on employment, housing, and food and medical supplies.] Such an increase in population would warrant Japan's adopting a Jewish policy. But the arrivals of these new Jews was not by accident and provides a sharp delineation between German and Japanese anti-Semitism. While the German solution to the Jewish Problem would be enslavement and genocide, the Japanese rejected this solution with another vision in mind in East Asia. Kranzler's research speaks of this "ironic twist of fate" or "incredible role of the Axis Powers, especially Japan, in actually making possible the survival of 18,000 Jews" (Kranzler 22). For a time, Italy allowed use of her ports and ships and Japan granted refugees asylum in Kobe and in Shanghai's Hongkew, although German pressure to slaughter these Jews would move Japan to create a ghetto and levy further restrictions on them in 1943 (Kranzler 23). [Note: Meisinger, the so-called "butcher of Warsaw", came to Japan and to Shanghai to offer suggestions to the Japanese as to how they might carry out an efficient Nazi slaughter, proposing they be gassed, be set assail on ships that were then sunk, or be isolated on nearby islands to starve. The Japanese by most reports were repulsed by such suggestions.]

So what was this anti-Semitic plan of salvation for the Jewish Refugees? And what did Japan have to gain by its acceptance of so many escaping Naziism? Japan struggled with its own problems of population, economy, and industrialism. Among the solutions to these problems would emerge the Manchurian solution to Japan's problems. Manchuria would be independent, multiracial, and harmonious. As Colonel Ishiwara put it, "In order to build a Manchukuo of one people we must work with the other races to establish an ideal state. That is the real meaning of racial harmony" (Kranzler 191). He even denounced the racist conduct of some Japanese toward Chinese that he had witnessed in China.

Ishiwara's doctrines influenced other military and diplomatic officers, Colonel Senko Yasue of the Army, Captain Koreshiga Inuzuka of the Navy, Lieutenant-general Nobutaka Shioden, and others, men who would also share two additional and almost opposite influences: Jacob Schiff's loan to Japan in 1904-5 to punish the Russian persecution of the Jews, a loan that would help Japan refurbish her Navy and gain success in her conflict with Russia, and military interactions with White Russian anti-Semites in Manchuria that would introduce them to such anti-Semitic works as *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. These men serving as self-proclaimed "Jewish experts" would believe there was indeed a world-wide Jewish plot to take over global economies and governments so frequently fomented in Germany and Russia. Rather than seeing this economic and business power as imminent danger, Inuzuka interpreted anti-

Semitic books and publications to mean that the Jews had “an immeasurably golden power over the financial, political and industrial worlds” (Kranzler 197), including over the US economy, Congress, and President Roosevelt. [Note: FDR was widely regarded and represented as Jewish in Japan. Political cartoons often depict him as a monster with a J somewhere on his person, for Jude.] These Jewish experts were the creators of what Marvin Tokayer and Mary Swartz would call the *fugu* plan, and would be pivotal in wording Japan’s Jewish policy, albeit with quite limited experiences with actual Jews. As Tokayer explains,

“There was no lack of anti-Semitism in any of the bureaus of the Japanese government. However this prejudice was not of the same order as traditional European-Christian anti-Semitism. In Japan, Jews were not hated simply because they were Jews. Rather, some Japanese feared Jews because they equated Jewishness with Communism (and simultaneously, if irrationally, with the excesses of capitalism) and because they believed Jews to be the cause—through the ‘3-S tactic’ of sports, screen and sex—of the breakdown of Japanese traditions. Throughout the late thirties and early forties, government and military leaders at all levels had been exposed to hundreds of articles bearing such titles as: ‘Jewish Power, Basis of Evil,’ ‘What Is the Jewish Plot?,’ ‘Russia under a Jewish Government,’ ‘The Jewish Commercial Movement’ and so forth...All the ‘Jewish experts’ were, under discreet pen names, heavy contributors to the KHR [a monthly journal called Studies in International Conspiracy]: Yasue, Inuzuka, General Shioden, Shogun Sakai...”

(Tokayer 141).

James Ross, in relaying the stories of 4 refugees in *Escape to Shanghai*, outlines this uncertain relationship of Jews and Japanese at the time. He says,

“Although the Japanese were now allied with the same Nazis who had imprisoned ... Jews and driven them from Europe, they had not disturbed their sanctuary in Shanghai. They were ruthless in their conquest of China, yet, up to this point, had shown an almost benign neglect toward the Jews and other foreigners.

The refugees' uncertainty reflected an apparent confusion among the Japanese themselves. Japan's brief history with the Jews was a mysterious tangle of conflicting sentiments. There were strains of both anti-Semitism and friendship, of respect for Jewish wealth and power combined with the worst stereotypes of world Jewish conspiracies. Yet it all came from the same source, a Japanese pragmatism that made it possible to arrange alliances with both Nazis and Jews” (Ross 140).

Indeed, whether pragmatic or confused, both Yasue and Inuzuka would write about their goals for forging an alliance with the Jews of East Asia. Perhaps the Jewish people could be used to promote cooperation with a US already angered by Japanese military movements in East Asia. As Yasue would suggest in a lecture, “The Jewish people, while both Japan and Manchukuo render protection to them, will contribute to the interests of the two countries...Idealistically we can first solidify [i.e. unite] the Jewish people in

Manchuria, then proceed to the indoctrination of those in North, Middle and South China and finally of those all over the world" (Kranzler 223). Inuzuka, who first referred to this use of the Jews as a *fugu* plan, made Jews the symbol for the White Man, the exploiter of Asia. A 1936 writing under his pen-name Utsunomiya contended that "the Jewish financiers...intend to drive the Japanese out of China...[T]he British, French and German Jews have given a loan of \$200,000,000 to China for the development of Southwest China, in order to forestall a further advance of Japan Southwards...[as part of] an anti-Japanese plot by the Jews" (Kranzler 201). Although the original in *fugu* plans considered allowing tens of thousands of Jewish refugees into Manchuria where they would bring their expertise and capital and intervene with the west, Inuzuka recognized that these refugees might not accept the leadership or control of Japan. Still ironically, Inuzuka suggested making use of Jewish capital while proceeding with caution to exert the necessary control: "our country may be in need of an enormous amount of funds for the development of China, it would be important to study in detail and find to what extent we can make use of the Jewish people, to what degree they are incompatible with our purposes, and so forth. It is emphatically advised, therefore, that our intelligence agencies should be strengthened and investigations on the spot intensified" (Kranzler 222). [Note: Fugu refers to the fish that is a delicacy if properly prepared and deadly poisonous if not.]

Although 3 major conferences on the Jews were organized and brought to fruition during the 30's, Japan's basic policy toward Jews was officially adopted on December 6, 1938, by the Five Ministers Conference, the highest policy-making body in the Japanese government, consisting of the prime minister, foreign minister, and ministers of the army, navy, and treasury.

After an introduction that stated Japan's commitment to the principle of racial equality, her need to attract international capital to the empire and to avoid antagonizing the United States, the conference adopted three principles, specifically naming Jews living in or entering Japan, Manchuria, and China, who were to be treated the same as foreign nationals and dealt with on the basis of existing immigration policies pertaining to other foreigners. Interestingly, the principles state that no special effort either to expel or to attract Jew is to be made, with this final statement: "However, exceptions may be made for businessmen and technicians with utility value to Japan" (Goodman 111). This policy responded to Nazi intelligence operatives' promotion of Germany's anti-Semitic program and to the growing number of refugees coming under Japanese control. As Goodman points out,

"By March 1938, twenty thousand Jews had crossed the Soviet Union and were seeking refuge in Japan's puppet kingdom, Manchukuo. Other Jewish refugees were making their way to Shanghai by boat. By May 1941, as many as six thousand Jews had passed through the Japanese port of Kobe on their way to

various third-country destinations. While only a handful of Jews remained in Japan when war broke out with the United States in December 1941, the Jewish population of Japanese-controlled Shanghai swelled to eighteen thousand. The government required some basic policy to deal with these two issues" (Goodman 111-112).

Whether pragmatic or fearful, these plans by Japanese experts in high places seems not to have translated to the Japanese people themselves or to at least one consul placed in Lithuania for a few months in 1939-40. In 1938, when Chiune Sugihara was transferred from Helsinki, Finland to Kovno, Lithuania, he was to monitor and report on Soviet and German war plans (Saul). Instead, he saw some 14,000 Polish Jews that had been uprooted first by Nazis entering Poland, then by Soviets who took Lithuania, trapping them (USHMM).

As Soviets ordered all consulates closed, the salvation of these Polish Jews, as many as 2500 of them yeshiva students and teachers, fell to men of conscience. Jan Zwartendijk, Dutch consul in Kovno, and Sugihara served as a sort of team in providing these Polish refugees with transit visas through Kobe and Shanghai to the end destination of Curacao, which like Shanghai required no visa. Although Sugihara asked permission via wire to grant these transit visas, he was told not to do so 3 times before he determined to reject the Japanese government's provision and begin a process that would involve his and his wife's writing some 300 visas per day for 29 days and giving his visa stamp to a

refugee on his departure so more Jews could be saved. But the decision to offer aid was a family one, made by Sugihara, his wife, his sister-in-law, and his two young sons, the oldest six. After considering what punishments they might face, Sugihara's six-year-old asked a simple question that sealed the decision: "If we don't help them, won't they die?" (Saul). The answer was clear. Yes. In fact, thousands without transit visas and means of escape died in Lithuanian pogroms. But the question itself is interesting—not, if we help them, will they live, but if we don't, won't they die. Had the second question been asked, perhaps the answer and decision would have altered significantly. How can we know, after all, if our positive efforts will produce positive results? We can't. We can only act and hope, as did the Sugiharas.

Kranzler reports, "Sugihara issued over 3,500 Japanese transit visas, evidently from humanitarian motives alone...[and] unlike consuls from many Latin American countries, derived no monetary gain. On the contrary, his achievement resulted in his early dismissal" (311). Goodman calls Sugihara's choice, "commonsense altruism" suggesting that as many as 6,000 were assisted, since families could travel under one visa. He continues, "Sugihara's actions were an expression of the same simple decency that many Japanese showed to Jewish refugees during their sojourn in Japan. It stood in stark contrast to the self-interested chauvinism of approved ideologues like Koyama, Shioden, and Inuzuka; and it ran directly counter to the explicit government policy against affording Jews any special treatment. The government took a dim

view of Sugihara's altruistic insubordination" (Goodman 134). Refugees in their stories of survival in Kobe and later in Shanghai, refer to Sugihara as a savior, a holy man, a saint (Saul), Yad Veshem Martyrs Remembrance Authority in Jerusalem recognized him as "Righteous among Nations," his biographers align him with samurai ethics, with extraordinary qualities, with Oskar Schindler, and call him a "model of individual moral courage and commonsense compassion" (Goodman 234), but Sugihara gave only two reasons for his action: "They were human beings and they needed help. I'm glad I found the strength to make the decision to give it to them" and "I may have to disobey my government, but if I don't I would be disobeying God" (Saul). [In this disagreement with government, he parallels Philip Morrison who said of his part in creating the atomic bomb, "We each did our own thing and hoped the leadership would know what to do. That was a mistake" (Strom 383).] Sugihara would not know the outcome of his action for 30 years when in 1969 he was sought and found by a man he had helped to save.

The refugees? Those in Kobe would go on to end destinations or be transferred to the Shanghai Hongkew ghetto before the Pacific War. Their lives there and the dynamics of their survival requires another paper on another day. Sugihara after being "unceremoniously dismissed" (Saul) from his diplomatic position, went without a steady job for almost a year, working part time as translator and interpreter and finally serving for 20 years as a manager for an

export company with business in Moscow (Saul); his deed has become a small but profoundly positive footnote in the larger and sadder history.

What can be learned from such instances of sanity in a world gone mad? Nechama Tec examines Christians who risked their lives to save Jews in an attempt to find a “sociological pattern to determine what characteristics these people had in common, whether they were related by class, religion, or other factors” (Teaching About the Holocaust 51). Other theorists suggest that those who withstand fear and act to save others are somehow “extraordinary” beings, more intelligent, humane, fearless, courageous—super humans. I submit that these few persons are not USUAL people, but they are people, just as we are, as our students are—regular people with hard choices to make. It interests me that, despite the praise now heaped on those who aid others under horrific conditions, few rescuers suggest their decision was extraordinary, just difficult and frightening, given the cost to them as individuals and families. Sugihara says humbly, “I felt that my decision was humanely correct,” subtly indicating it had not been in keeping with the Japanese government nor a great career move. Perhaps Sugihara proves Viktor Frankl’s point in *Man’s Search for Meaning*: Frankl says, “Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way” (124).

History teaches many lessons and we are left to make meaning. If we focus only on power as destruction, I fear our students will embrace that idea and lifestyle, for they and we want to be powerful people. But if in teaching the horrible truths that are often history, we can also teach a new angle of vision and suggest that power is also the courage of kindness, of creation, of facing and owning the worst with a desire never to become that, maybe new choices can be facilitated. Teaching and learning are also power, no? And although we teach our students collectively, we reach them individually. In this way, as the Jewish refugees said of their saviors, we can “save the generations.” Or at least, we can move them in another direction. Gandhi’s words to the Hindu Muslim assembly in South Africa, to men angry enough to fight and who say they will die for their cause always bolsters my resolve. He says, “Yes, I applaud such courage. I too need courage and this is a cause for which I too am willing to die, but my friends, there is no cause, none, for which I am willing to kill” (*Gandhi*). This is the kind of power I want too. And it is my choice and yours finally, if we pursue it.

Alvin Toffler’s “first truly humane civilization in recorded history” (Strom 383) hasn’t happened yet, but it is still a noble goal, still perhaps a more intelligent, pragmatic, and solution-oriented possibility than, say, dropping bombs and building more destructive weapons. Diplomats who used what power they had to move in the direction of that much-hoped-for civilization only set in motion this move to Shanghai and Japan that would ultimately save thousands.

Countless others, regular people with regular lives, who were responsible for daily encounters and kindnesses and individual connections, were the active ingredient in these survivals. Do we have all the names of these "helpers"? No. Nor can we name all those who received this help and survived in destinations across the globe. And that perhaps is a most important lesson for us and our students as we look at the good in so much bad in history. We don't always get credit for our humane choices. We aren't always going to get the parade, the place in the history book or museum, the plaque or statue. What we get for our acts of humanity is...humanity. It's only one more starfish in the surf, but perhaps that's a start.

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