

Sugihara Chiune: The Making of a Russianist

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Sugihara Chiune is the only Japanese national awarded the title of “Righteous among the Nations”, a category reserved by the Israeli government for non-Jews who risked their lives to save Jews during the Holocaust. In 1940, while serving as a consular official in Kaunas, then capital of Lithuania, he issued over 2000 Japanese transit visas mainly to Polish nationals, most of whom were Jews, allowing them to escape from Soviet occupation and deportations, as well as the impending Holocaust that began less than a year later when the Nazis invaded.¹ Although there are over 25,000 Righteous men and women, Sugihara is among the most well-known, together with Oskar Schindler of movie fame and Raoul Wallenberg, the Swedish diplomat interned and killed by his Soviet “liberators,” thereby becoming a Cold War martyr as well.

In order to understand the roots of Sugihara’s extraordinary humanitarian act, it is important to examine his training and experience prior to arriving in Kaunas. Most importantly, Sugihara’s gift of visas is a reflection of the refusal by the Soviet Peoples Commissariat of For-

1. The list Sugihara provided to the Foreign Ministry a few months after leaving Kaunas has 2139 names. It is an appendix to this publication. The Yad Vashem website states that “he provided between 2100 and 3500 transit visas.” Yad Vashem official website consulted at: <http://www.yadvashem.org/righteous/stories/sugihara.html>

eign Affairs (NKID), the official name for the Soviet Foreign Ministry until 1946, to grant Sugihara himself a Soviet visa in 1936, when he was appointed to the Moscow embassy by the Japanese Foreign Ministry. Had he been in Moscow, he would not have been in Kaunas stamping visas for life.

The Soviet declaration of Sugihara as *persona non grata*, a man whose presence in Moscow was deemed not “in the interests of our [Soviet-Japanese] relations,” also had its roots, but these must be sought neither on Russian, nor Japanese soil, but in the capital of Northeast China, the Sino-Russian-Japanese city of Haerbin/Kharbin/Harupin. For almost fifteen years, Sugihara called Harbin “home.” One year after his arrival in 1919, he began to study Russian at the newly-founded Japan-Russian Association School (*Nichi-ro Kyokai Gakko*, later renamed as *Harupin Gakuin*). Harbin, in those years, housed over 100,000 Russian refugees from the Bolshevik regime still in the process of consolidating power, so there were many opportunities to practice Russian outside the classroom.

In order to train experts in Russian affairs, the Russo-Japanese Association, headed by its president Goto Shimpei (former Foreign Minister), set up the Japan-Russian Association School in 1920 in the hope that its graduates would play as important a role in later Russo-Japanese relations as the graduates of Foreign Ministry-supported *Dobunkai* had done for Sino-Japanese ties.² As a base to expand Japanese power to Siberia and north Manchuria, Harbin was considered a best place to instruct students³. The school began its first semester on 11 October 1920, just after Japanese troops had re-occupied the Russian Far East and Manchurian railway lines in retaliation for the massacre

2. *Harupin Gakuin-shi:1920-1945*, Tokyo, 1986. (A History of Harbin Gakuin); Tomita Takeshi, “Goto Shinpei to Nichiro Kyokai 1920-29”, *Kan*, vol30, 2007, 310-327; Douglas Reynolds, “Training Young China Hands: Toa Dobun Shoin and Its Precursors, 1886-1945”, *The Japanese Informal Empire in China, 1895-1937* ed. By Peter Duus, Raymond Myers, and Mark Peattie, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1989).

3. Matsutani Akihiro, *Nichiro kyokaigakko no seiritsu to sono seikaku*, (A Study of Establishment of Nichiro Kyokai Gakko and Its Characteristics) Bulletin of Institute of Education of Tsukuba University, vol.28 (2004) 73-84.

at Nikolaevsk-na-Amure of several hundred Japanese nationals.⁴ Only in April 1933, as it was folded into the new structures of Manchukuo would the school's name change to the Harbin Academy. Over the course of 25 years, 1412 students would graduate to become an elite network of Russia specialists.⁵

Although it is difficult to speculate on the mood among the students, this was the high-water mark of Japanese imperialism, so many must have understood their duty to Empire. The essays in Russian produced by students are still held in the Japanese Foreign Ministry. In October 1919 Sugihara Chiune arrived in Harbin via Waseda University from whence he tested into the Foreign Ministry program. The school paid boarding fees to Russian families who let students stay with them, providing conversation and exposure to Russian customs. Sugihara's progress was solid, including part-time work in the Japanese consulate. He had patriotically volunteered for Army duty, while taking a one-year leave from Russian studies. On 4 March 1923, he gave a ten-minute oral, previously-written, Russian essay on "The Development of Asia." Although many pages were about Turkey, much in the news with Atatürk's victory over the Greeks and the abolition of the Sultanate, the general conclusions were closer to home, looking forward to renewed relations between Russia and Japan. "Our present obligation," concluded Sugihara, "is the study of the Russian language which will play a big role in the future" offering roles on the stage "at the center of the world's attention ... to young people foreign to the shores of the Sungari (*molodye chuzhie beregam Sungari liudi*)."⁶ Sugihara would

4. On the Nikolaevsk Incident as it is called in Japanese, see Hara Teruyuki, *Shiberia shuppei: kakumei to kansho 1917-1922* (The Siberian Expedition: Revolution and Intervention), Tokyo, 1989, pp. 518-525.

5. Uchimura Gosuke, *Collected Works*, Vol.1, (Tokyo, 2008), 106-9; Takayuki Hochi, *Manshuno johokichi Harbin gakuin* (Harbin Academy: The Intelligence Center in Manchuria), (Shincho-sha: Tokyo, 2010).

6. Japanese Foreign Ministry Archive 6-1-7/6-3-1 (Document 1) The examiners noted that they were sorry that the Foreign Ministry headquarters in Tokyo could not hear their outstanding oral presentations. I am grateful to Shiraishi Masaaki for pointing me to this source.

indeed go on to bigger parts in Japan's dramatic 20th century, but his biggest part may yet be played in the 21st century.

Nei Saburo (Doc. 2), who had entered the School a year behind Sugihara, also gave an oral presentation on the same day as Sugihara, exhibiting similarly fluent Russian skills. He also called for immediate resumption of Japan-Russian trade relations as an important step towards friendship and "the welfare of both peoples." And like Sugihara, Nei's optimistic and generous vision was accompanied by an analysis of global events that went far beyond Russo-Japanese ties. Sugihara's discussion of Turkey went together with a Pan-Asian critique of "the Saxons," and their colonial mindset. Nei's call for trade was accompanied by a comparison of Russia's contemporary trade status with six European countries — America, England, France, Belgium, Germany, and Poland. These essays reveal the high quality of both language and international relations skills achieved at the Harbin Academy. Coincidentally, when *tranzitniki* with Sugihara visas traveled the full length of the Soviet Union from Kaunas to Vladivostok, Nei was serving as consul in that city, where he also helped the refugees to reach safety in Japan and beyond. (Docs. 59–61,63).

Twelve years later, when Sugihara was barred from Moscow and the Soviet Foreign Ministry blamed his conduct at Harbin, he was asked to write an explanation of his activities during over a decade in Manchuria. (Doc.20)⁷ Sugihara's retrospect provides a detailed map by which to retrace the path that trained one of the great Japanese Russianists of that era. Sugihara begins with his appointment to the Harbin consulate, as a relatively low-ranking Russia specialist in 1924. In the same year, he married a "White" Russian, the daughter of a former Tsarist officer. His work at this time matched Russo-Japanese relations in gen-

7. This document was hand-written by Sugihara and submitted to the Foreign Ministry's Europe-Asia Department, First Section in the middle of March 1937. See Shiraishi Masaaki, "Gaikokan Sugihara Chiune no zai Harubin so-ryoji-kan oyobi Manshukoku zaikin-chu no katsudo wo tsutaeru chosho nitsuite" in *Kokusai kankei gaku kenkyu*, 2008, No. 21, p. 151–161. Hereafter this document is referred to as "Gaikokan" with the relevant points, eight in all, indicated.

eral, focusing on “reconciliation activities” (Gaikokan, Point 2) as the Japanese Siberian-Manchurian Intervention ended and the resumption of diplomatic ties with Soviet Russia was negotiated. But after 1925, Sugihara also took on more responsible consular work, including the issuance (or denial) of visas. In parallel with the Russian Section of the South Manchurian Railway Research Department whose leading lights included Miyazaki Masayoshi and Shimano Saburo, Sugihara produced a 600-page internal study of the Soviet NEP economy in 1927. It would quickly be made obsolete by forced collectivization and industrialization in the USSR, but it did strengthen Sugihara’s economic skills and these would be useful a few years later, as we will see. From 1927, Sugihara’s tasks became more political including, an extended trip to Beijing to study the documents on alleged Communist infiltration that had been seized from the Soviet embassy in violation of international immunities. (Gaikokan, Point 3)

Between 1927 and 1931, the Soviet consulate would certainly have taken greater notice of Sugihara as he vetoed visas to 15 Soviet citizens, oversaw the stealing of Soviet consular codes, investigated border smuggling, ran his first Russian agents and conducted anti-Soviet propaganda by providing relief to White Russian orphans through the Japanese Red Cross after their parents were killed by the Red Army during the 1929 war between Zhang Zuolin and the Soviet Union over control of the Chinese Eastern Railway. (Gaikokan, Point 4) Soviet intelligence collection in Manchuria was excellent and Sugihara’s activities would certainly have been reported.

But more was ahead. Under Harbin Consul General Ohashi Chūichi, Sugihara took on further responsibilities for controlling the Russian population of Harbin. In 1932, Ohashi became Deputy Foreign Minister in the newly-formed puppet government of Manchukuo, where Japanese Deputies told Chinese Ministers what to do. Sugihara’s star rose as Ohashi requested his subordinate to continue work in charge of all Russian/Soviet affairs in the new “state.” But military men were dominant in Manchukuo, so Sugihara would have to follow their orders in undertaking jobs that were increasingly distasteful. The means of persuasion became less diplomatic. Sugihara refers to

a “(threatening) negotiation” against Soviet railway executives under guidance from the Japanese military mission and its notorious chief Doihara Kenji. (“Gaikokan,” Point 5c). These led to arrests and detentions of Soviet citizens for all of which Sugihara had to answer as he faced the steady stream of protests from the Soviet Consul-General M. M. Slavutskii. Some incidents angered the Soviet representatives, but others “especially incited anger.” (Point 6c), such as engineering a White Russian “protest” claiming that the League of Nation’s Lytton mission was biased. According to the petition, Manchukuo’s administration was more just and fair than Zhang Zuolin’s or his son’s, Zhang Xueliang.

In 1932–35, a new stage began as Sugihara became deeply involved in negotiations and pressure tactics aimed at buying the USSR’s share in the Chinese Eastern Railway at a rock-bottom price. He was the interpreter, but more than that as well, although this role is never mentioned in his overview document, probably for fear of revealing the delicate division of labor between the Japanese masters of the negotiation and the Manchukuo puppets to whom the railway would be sold. On 4 June 1932, the Soviet consulate in Harbin reported to NKID that the “Deputy Representative of the Manchurian Foreign Ministry Sugihara” had told a correspondent of the newspaper *Shenbao* that in the near future agreements regarding the CER would be reviewed. The same telegram reported that two Soviet high officials on the railway had been detained and then released two days earlier, but that now four more had been arrested in the middle of the night.⁸ But this was just one case among many, that beginning with the “Bazanov incident” in late March, led to the arrests of over 150 Soviet citizens faced with trumped-up charges of terrorism, all as a way of softening up the Soviet side before beginning negotiations.⁹ In Sugihara’s memorandum, these

8. *Russko-kitaiskie otnosheniia v XX veke. Sovetsko-kitaiskie otnosheniia. Materialy i dokumenty. Vol.3* (September 1931–September 1937) (Moscow 2010), 93–94.

9. *VKP(b), Komintern i Iaponiia, 1917–1941* (red. Adibekov i Vada) (Rosspen, 2001), 82, 87.

fall under Points 6a and 6c. In July, the Commissar of Transport L. M. Kaganovich wrote to Stalin to report that a CER wharf on the Sungari River had been commandeered by the Japanese. Sugihara showed up to explain that this was because the CER had not been willing to rent it.¹⁰ His memo refers to the “requisitioning of the Hakku pier (by army and transport authorities)” (Point 6b).

Although he might have thought that he was simply conversing with local representatives of Soviet power, Sugihara’s steady drumbeat of Japanese demands, accompanied by violent actions undertaken by other Japanese agencies that included arrests, confiscations, torture and murder, were all transmitted to the highest levels of the Soviet hierarchy.¹¹ While the CER negotiations were conducted in Tokyo, Sugihara was absent from Harbin, and therefore somewhat less in the public eye, but returning to Manchuria on 31 August 1934, he published an interview in Russian that found its way to the Soviet Foreign Ministry. *Pravda* responded on September 5 in an article entitled “Harassment by Japanese Militarists.” The only Japanese person mentioned by name is Sugihara (twice).

Worst of all from Moscow’s perspective, these Japanese methods, including a next round of pressure tactics against Soviet employees on the railway, proved effective as Stalin gave way and finally sold the CER far less than the original asking price. The rise of Hitler to power and the demilitarization of the Rhineland represented real dangers in the West that required avoidance at all costs of entanglements with the Japanese in the East. The Soviets had to give in, but they did not have to forget their humiliating acquiescence in the face of naked aggression.

10. *Stalin i Kaganovich. Perepiska. 1931–1936* (ROSSPEN, 2001), 221. This is our clearest proof that Sugihara was known to Stalin.

11. On Stalin’s role in CER negotiations based on Russian archival sources, see Terayama Kyosuke “Sutarin to chuto tetsudo baikyaku” in Enatsu Yoshiki et als. ed., *Kindai chugoku tohoku chiiki-shi kenkyu no shin-shikaku*, 2005, pp.154–184. Stalin was irritated by the Japanese press campaigns, and ordered Kaganovich to counter campaign against “provocations” by Japanese media in summer of 1934. Stalin checked and even rewrote the memoranda written by Kaganovich and Molotov, which protested the mass arrest of CER workers.

Finally, Sugihara mentions his few meetings with K. V. Rodzaevskii and M. R. Vonsiatskii, the self-styled supreme leaders of Russian Fascism. (Point 7) There is no reason not to believe Sugihara's minimization of his contact with these repugnant individuals, whose hatred of the very variety that had made Harbin prosperous could only have alienated Sugihara himself. Sugihara would certainly have been horrified at the 1933 kidnapping and subsequent murder of the son of the Jewish owner of Harbin's most famous hotel, the *Moderne*. This bestial act, that included cutting off one of the budding pianist's ears to send to Papa to encourage swift payment of the ransom, was conducted by gangsters with ties to the Russian Fascist Party, which in turn had ties to Japanese military police. And it was widely believed among the Russian speakers in Harbin at the time that the Japanese military police was deeply involved in the crime.¹² Sugihara, by virtue of his position, is likely to have known many details both on the White Russian and Japanese sides of the whole tragic Kaspe affair.

Sugihara's memorandum is somewhat disingenuous in insisting that he was no closer to White Russians than he had to be in conducting his duties, but it is clear that he understood how he might have angered the Soviet side. The Japanese embassy in Moscow made two efforts to have the Soviet rejection of Sugihara's appointment to Moscow reversed, but in vain. On 5 February 1937, Counselor Sato met with the head of the Japan desk B. I. Kozlovskii to request review (*peresmotr*) of the Sugihara visa. Kozlovskii replied that the decision had been made after "careful consideration and must be considered final."¹³ Nonetheless, on 23 February a next discussion took place and on 28 February Ambassador Shigemitsu finally took the matter to Vice Commissar B. S. Sto-

12. On the growth of the Russian Fascist Party in Manchuria immediately following the Japanese invasion, see John Stephan, *The Russian Fascists: Tragedy and Farce in Exile, 1925-1945* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), 89; Nakashima Takeshi, "Forming the Russian Fascist Party in Harbin 1925-1933" in *Jinbun Gakuho*, 505, 2014, pp.1-19; Nakashima Takeshi, "Roshia fashisuto-to to harubin no hanyudayashugi 1931-1937", *Yudaya Israeru kenkyu*, No. 29, 2015; Sabine Breuillard, "L'Affaire Kaspé revisitée" *Revue des études slaves*, tome 73, fascicule 2-3, 2001.

13. Memorandum of Conversation in Moscow between B. I. Kozlovskii and Sato, 5 February 1937

moniakov. At this meeting, Stomoniakov expressed his surprise at the Japanese side's "insistence" on such a "minor question." Stomoniakov then repeated allegations that Sugihara had "relations with the most extreme White-Guard emigre circles" and that therefore his "not coming [to Moscow] (*nepriezd*) was in the interest of our relations."

Shigemitsu hinted that there would be reprisals against Soviet personnel and Stomoniakov became heated, announcing that "some circles in Japan" consider "illegal and unacceptable" behavior normal. His example was the Japanese Consul-General in Tianjin publishing greetings in which he wished White Russians in North China the "fulfillment of their national dream," clearly supporting anti-Soviet aspirations. Stomoniakov implied that Sugihara was similar and that Moscow considered "Sugihara's activities in Manchuria to be abnormal, illegal and unacceptable. We can only be surprised that the Japanese government insists on the presence in our country of a person, who has undertaken anti-Soviet activity. I ask the Ambassador to understand that there is no way to contest our right to deny entry to such persons." To this Shigemitsu replied that he had already said enough on this subject and did not want to repeat himself.¹⁴

So Sugihara, for lack of a Soviet visa, leaped over to Europe, taking over a series of posts at Japanese consulates along the Soviet Western border, classic observation posts. First came Helsinki, then Kaunas, then Prague, then Koenigsberg (now Kaliningrad) and finally Bucharest, where the Red Army detained him in 1944. As a diplomat-spy, Sugihara was expected to set up a network of informants.¹⁵ Arriving in Kaunas on 28 August 1939, Sugihara soon settled in right next to

14. Memorandum of Conversation between Ambassador Shigemitsu Mamoru and Vice Commissar of Foreign Affairs B. S. Stomoniakov on 28 February 1937. Compared to the Soviet source which severely condemned Sugihara's illegal activities in Manchuria, the Japanese version of the Shigemitsu-Stomoniakov Conversation ambiguously states: "From the Soviet point of view, Sugihara's behavior is not normal." JFMA, J.2.1.0 X1-R1-1

15. Shiraishi Masaaki is the undisputed master of Sugihara materials on the Japanese side. From his position at the Foreign Ministry archive, he has been able to uncover many fascinating documents. Shiraishi Masaaki, *Choho no tensai: Sugihara Chiune* (Tokyo: Shinchosensho, 2011) covers Sugihara's intelligence work.

the dismemberment of Poland. We know a fair amount about his work with Polish networks, probably the ones who gave him his best sense of Soviet-German relations inside captive, divided Poland.

In the spring of 1940, it became clear that the Soviet Union would take over the Baltic countries in a more direct manner, a process that would lead to their full incorporation as three additional Soviet Socialist Republics. Polish patriots working for the Japanese embassy would no longer be welcome on Lithuanian, soon Soviet, soil. Jews, refugees from Poland, would also be at risk, as foreigners. It was also plain to see that the Germans, with their intentions toward Jews clear enough, were just across the border and unsated after devouring Poland. Soon the Polish patriots and the Jewish refugees would line up at Sugihara's consulate for transit visas to Japan.¹⁶

This is a story about many borders crossed and the visas that functioned as keys to otherwise closed frontiers. In this book, we have written about Polish patriots crossing between Poland and Lithuania; about the stateless Dutch consul issuing visas to a location to which not a single recipient would travel (Curacao); about Soviet requests for Manchukuo visas that were never given; about Soviet visas first refused, but then issued; and ultimately about Japanese visas for life. Further back in time, the non-issuance of a Soviet visa to Sugihara placed him in a position to engrave his name on history.

16. Tokyo would have known about this issue from dispatches from the Japanese Minister at Riga, Ohtaka, who sent a series of "Baltic Reports" (*Baruto shunpo*) in 1940 to Tokyo, which also mentioned the planned resettlement of 7500 Lithuanian Jews, as well as Polish refugees via the Soviet Union to Palestine. But the message does not suggest that the Japanese government would become involved. Ohtaka's source on this information, could well have been Sugihara. *Baruto shunpo* 6(20 April 1940).