

MISHA IS SAVED BY SUGIHARA

At this point I am going to interrupt Misha's story and interject the tale of the Japanese diplomat who, no doubt, issued Misha's visa. The man's name was **Chiune Sugihara**.

He was a career Japanese diplomat. He knew the Curacao papers were meaningless... but I'm getting ahead of my story. In March 1939 the 39 year old Sugihara (along with his 26 year old wife and 4 children) was sent to Kaunas, the temporary capital of Lithuania. (While living there he met a 12 year old Jewish boy, and attended a Chanukah party. But Sugihara neither liked or disliked Jews. *(His son said "I don't know Jewish. They have blue eyes and look-alike.")*)



Lithuania had been part of Russia for over 100 years (1795-1914). It had declared its independence at the end of the First World War, then fought a series of wars with the Bolsheviks and with Poland before becoming an independent democracy in 1922. Annexed by Russia in 1940, it was later overrun by the Nazis in June 1941.

When Misha entered the country its leaders had accepted Russian occupation.

Those who opposed the Bolsheviks were treated harshly. 35,000 were deported to Siberia and other parts of Russia. Thousands of Lithuanians were massacred. So Misha was right. The Russian occupation was anything but popular; hence it's not surprising that Misha concluded that Japan gave him a visa for political reasons.

(From the film **Conspiracy of Kindness**)

Sugihara: I opened my bedroom window in the morning and there they were about 200 of them, I guess, surrounding the house. We had no idea who they were.

Wife Yukiko: There were children, women, and young men. They were all hanging onto the fence. The young men were trying to climb over the fence but the security of the consulate was pushing them back.

Sugihara: They explained what had happened in their hometowns with the Germans. Poland had been bombed and occupied. I wanted to issue the visas, but I didn't know how I was going to do it. I had to wire the home office for instructions....There were hundreds of Jews outside the gates waiting and hoping and it bothered the Sugihara's. The ambassador wired his country for permission to grant visas. Permission was denied. He met with the Jews again, said he was sorry, and after the conversation wired again, twice. Both times his request was denied. Then, after conferring with his wife and children the career diplomat decided to act contrary to the orders of his government. Chiune Sugihara: Those people told me the kind of horror they would have to face if they didn't get away from the Nazis and I believed them... There was no place else for them to go. They trusted me. If I had waited any longer, even if permission came it might have been too late. In 29 days, between July 21 and Aug 28th 1940 he personally wrote and signed transit visas hour after hour ...300 a day. In the end his visas meant life to 6000 Jews (who now have 40,000 descendants.)94% of the Jews who were left in Lithuania were killed.

Sugihara: I may have disobeyed my government, but if I didn't I would be disobeying God. Conspiracy of Kindness: working 16 hours a day, Sugihara became obsessed with his mission. He even requested an extension on his stay in Kaunas so he could continue his life saving work. Many of the visas had to be handwritten in the complex characters of Japanese. In early September, after writing more than 2000 transit visas Sugihara prepared to leave for Berlin. Wife Yukiko: He was so exhausted, like a sick



person. Even though he was ordered to go to Berlin, he said he couldn't make it to Berlin and suggested we go to hotel and rest before leaving. When we got to the hotel, the Jewish people came looking for us there. So he wrote some more visas in the hotel. The next day when we got to the train station they were there too. So he wrote more visas on the platform until the train left. (We now honor Chiune Sugihara. We call him the Japanese Schindler) His actions were considered dishonorable by his superiors but he continued to serve the Japanese Foreign Ministry until 1947, when he was asked to resign. (After leaving Lithuania Sugihara spent time in Berlin and Koenigsberg but spent most of the war years as the ambassador in Bucharest Rumania. After the war the Russians threw Sugihara and his family into a POW camp for a year and a half. When he was released he could no longer serve in the diplomatic corps and spent his life as an interpreter) When asked why he risked his career to save other people, Sugihara quoted an old samurai saying, "Even a hunter cannot kill a bird which flies to him for refuge." In 1985 when he was honored by the Government of Israel as one who was Righteous among the nations he was asked why he did it. He liked to give two reasons: one that these refugees were human beings. And the other, that they simply needed help.

Sugihara died July 31 1986. I must admit I had never heard of Sugihara until one night, over 10 years ago, when I accompanied a few friends who were attending an event in his honor in San Francisco. Chiune had already died, so it must have been after 1986. His wife, Yukiko, had come to accept the honor. I listened to the story. And I remembered the story of Mischa's escape. And suddenly everything made sense.)



Back to Mischa's story: We still needed Russian exit visas. We had fictitious papers, names and addresses for this reason. Mischa remembers signing the name of the KGB colonel on Yakov's papers. Yakov and some others asked the Russians for transit visas to Turkey. Mischa and some others went by way of Russia. They traveled to Moscow and then Vladivostok on a 10 day train ride. Then they crossed the sea and went to Japan. In Japan they tried to get visas for Palestine. The British had a quota. They gave the Jewish Agency several hundred certificates. Japan treated the group as transients and refugees. By the end of 1940 Japan knew it was going to war with the U.S., and it

wanted all foreigners out of the country. So Mischa's group was put on a boat to Shanghai, a city that was under Japanese control. They traveled by tramp steamer. It was a smelly boat called "the sinking boat." Its engine had a crying sound. The Germans had sold it to the Japanese because the Germans couldn't stand the noise. The journey on the South China Sea took two days. The vessel was crowded. They received a daily ration of cooked, foul smelling rice. Mischa felt like he'd die. Shanghai was an international city where the British, French, and American companies had their Chinese headquarters. The Japanese had conquered it from China. After the boat, China was a salvation.



Before America went to war with Japan, Mischa worked hard to get a visa. He went to the American consulate. He had a letter from Senator Dirksen. The consulate called Mischa into his office and explained that "In America if you aren't happy, you can write your congressman. But the law is the law. You'll have to wait your turn."

In Shanghai the Europeans were locked in a ghetto. For 6 months no one was allowed to leave. After that you could leave days but you had to return every night. They received a daily bowl of soup, supplied by the joint distribution committee.

There were 60,000 refugees from Germany, Poland, Austria, etc, locked in a ghetto with facilities for

20,000. Some died of starvation. Some died of Cholera. If someone violated the laws, which were only written in Japanese, he was thrown in jail. In jail most people got Cholera. There was no forced labor. The buildings were large, having originally been warehouses. The joint distribution committee put in floors, bunk beds, and partitions. You could get a bowl of soup once a day and a shower once a week. The committee was limited by funds and by the Japanese.

Misha read Pravda until the war with America started. The Japanese had 2 emissaries in Washington D. C. while they were planning the raid on Pearl Harbor. On December 7th the Japanese bombed the American navy boats in Shanghai as well as those in Pearl Harbor.

After 6 months in the ghetto Misha could get out during the day. He had a paper that said he was a printer.

The leader of Misha's Zionist group in Shanghai was Joseph Tachoa, who later became Israel's representative to the UN. He came to China in 1918 to escape the communists. When the war was over and the Communists were getting closer, Tachoa took a chartered plane to Syria, then Lebanon, and finally Palestine as a tourist.

The group kept separate. They had a special building, special bunks, and ate in a special kitchen. Among the Jews in Shanghai were a number of prominent people including a lawyer who was the foremost expert on Napoleonic code in Europe. Somehow he lost his human dignity, his image of God, because he begged for extra food.

The Americans had a special bomb sight, so they had great accuracy. The Japanese set up their radar in the ghetto so the Americans wouldn't bomb it. But the Americans tried one day in broad daylight. They weren't very accurate (either the B-29 bomb site wasn't as good as they thought, or they had a bad bomber.) Misha was in the city that day. They killed 2000 civilians, including 60 refugees...14 Polish Jews. There was rubble all over. They had to pull bricks apart to find bodies. Misha remembers some young religious Jews sitting and studying throughout the entire bombing. The Jews decided to bury the 14 Polish Jews separately from the Germans. They gathered the bodies and started to march to the cemetery. The Japanese sent troops with bayonets. Several thousand people kept coming. The Japanese backed up. Apparently they had orders not to shoot.

Once he could leave the ghetto during the day, Misha did just that. He wheeled and dealt on the black market. To make a living he needed a telephone. He got acquainted with a couple of Russian Jews who had been working in Shanghai for several big companies including the Imperial Chemical Industry, a British company. The Russian Jews had gotten stranded. They had nothing to sell. But they did have an office and a telephone. Misha offered them 50% of what he sells for the use of the office and the telephone. He began calling firms. He remembers calling Nestle. They had a representative who was also stranded in Shanghai. Misha asked if he had anything left. "No. We sold out years ago." Misha asked him to take a look. He found 400 cases of sour (spoiled) sweet cream. Misha asked if it would be OK if he sent over a Cooley with a rickshaw.

The Cooley brought the case of cream over the brick roads of Shanghai. It was a very bumpy ride. When they examined the contents they found that 4 cans were swollen. They stank when they were opened.



The shaking had congealed the contents and turned it into something that looked like butter. One of the chemists looked at it. It was whey with globules of butterfat. He worked on it with vinegar and chemicals. Then he shook the next can. It can't be eaten but it can be used for soap or something.

Misha bought 100 cases. He sold it at a ten fold profit. Then he bought another 100 cases. But after that he was unable to buy anymore. The Nestles representatives heard that there was fresh Nestle butter on the market. They suspected that their cans of rancid oil had something to do with the rumor.

In all likelihood, no one ever ate or used the rancid contents of the cans. Their chief purpose was to allow people to convert their cash into commodities. Even useless commodities were more valuable than paper money in a Shanghai where rampant inflation was the order of the day. Pinya (a Yeshiva bocher he knew) was buying American dollars.

The Chinese thought the U.S. would lose the war. So they bought gold. Flints for lighters was a currency. The Hong Kong dollar was strong. Rice was good but you couldn't store it. Sometimes you dealt in non-existent commodities, like New Orleans cotton. Misha remembers buying some coffee that he never saw. 2 days later he sold it. Then he was worried because he had too much cash so he bought the coffee again at double the original price.



Misha dealt with Pinyas, the Yeshiva bocher, only once. One day Pinya had canned beef he wanted to sell. Misha said, "OK, sell it to me auf neurones." Auf nemones literally means on your conscience. If some religious Torchin businessman sold something to another religious Jew, the saying had the effect of swearing on a bible.

I am selling the item in question at a 25% profit, nothing more.

Several days later Misha entered a store and asked if they had anything to sell. They didn't. They had just gotten rid of 2 cases of canned beef. They sold it to Pinyas. It was the beef that Misha bought the next day. They told Misha how much they sold the beef to Pinyas for. Misha was surprised. Pinyas made a 125 profit. The next day he saw Pinyas on

the street. He revealed what he had accidentally learned. "And you sold it to me auf neurons."

Pinyas answered, "OK, I owe you a neurones."

Pinyas came out of Poland with the Mir Yeshiva. The whole yeshiva had crossed the border into Lithuania and somehow gotten papers to Shanghai. When they left Poland they were driving in wagons, singing a song about when the messiah would come. The Russians were aghast.

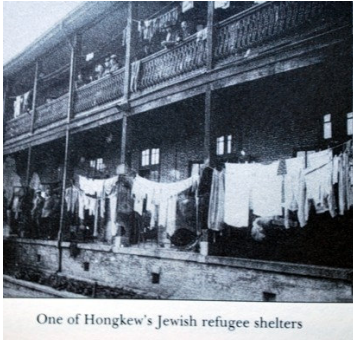
Someone said, 'let them go. They are parasites.' And the Russian border guard let them pass.

Misha was supervisor in Japan for the Yeshivas. He gave them their joint distribution allowance. But they had lots of money. It was transferred from America, to Argentina, to Japan. It was done by finding a company in the U.S. with a branch in Brazil and in Shanghai. The money was paid in, in America, and out in Shanghai. The Yeshiva ate well, both in Japan and in Shanghai.

Neil sent Misha money via Argentina during the war, or at least he tried to.

Misha felt the Japanese weren't as bad as the Germans. Of course, every month Misha needed an extension on his papers that allowed him to leave the ghetto during the day and return at night. He had to appear before a Japanese officer who would grant the extension. And each month, because he wouldn't bow to the officer, Misha was beaten up. And after the war they searched Shanghai and found enough of the gas used in the German concentration camps to kill all the refugees.

Once Misha got out of the ghetto he was on the black market. He got up in the morning with nothing, and he came back with 50,000 Chinese dollars. He rented a room. It was on a roof top and it was cold. After a while he lived in a room of his own.



One of Hongkew's Jewish refugee shelters

Shanghai Diary, A Young Girl's Journey from Hitler's Hate to War-torn China, by Ursula Bacon

Hitler came to power in January 1933 and immediately began the unrelenting persecution of German's "Number One Enemy," The Jews. By 1939 the western nations had closed their doors to Middle European emigrants and thousands of Jews fled Nazi Germany to the only open port available to them: Shanghai, China. A section of the city had been controlled by



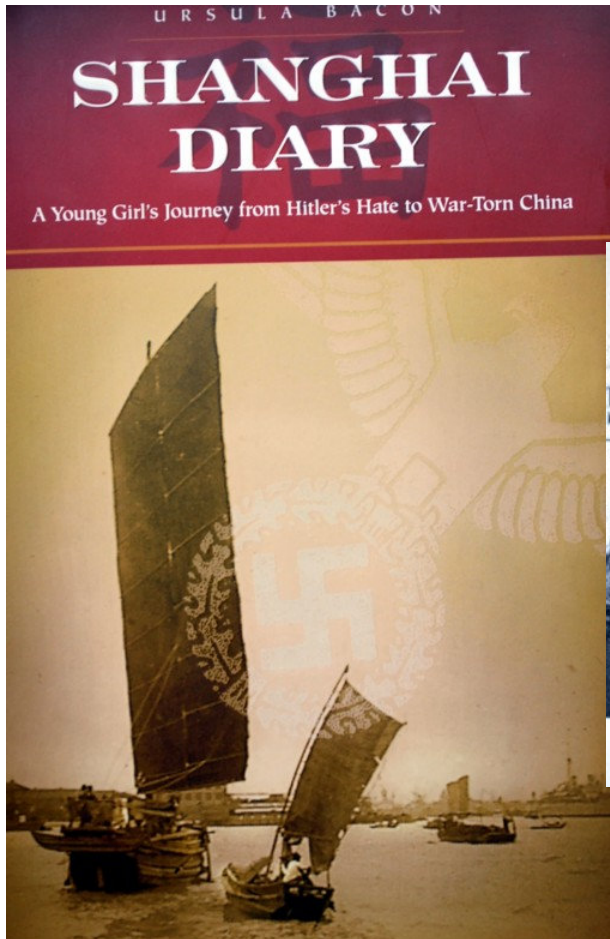
Everyday traffic in downtown Shanghai

Japanese occupation forces since 1937. The rest of this eccentric, exotic and exciting city would fall into their hands on December 8, 1941.

Once called the "armpit of the world," the "scum-slum of the Orient," and the "pimple on the hide of China," Shanghai ultimately served as the ort of last resort to almost 20,000 Middle European Jews.

Only a short time before the outbreak of World War II, eleven-year old Ursula Bacon and her parents made the long voyage to Shanghai with its promise of freedom at the end. As difficult as the first four years in Shanghai may have been, it was nothing compared to what awaited them during the next three years: being forced to live in a "Designated Area," a *ghetto*, under the harsh, neurotic reign of two overblown Japanese camp commanders suffering from delusions of grandeur.

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The Shanghai Bund in 1939