

The Soviet Union and the Transit of Jewish Refugees, 1939–1941

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Nazi Germany's *Anschluss* with Austria in March 1938 brought the Soviet Union face to face with the possibility of a mass transit across its territory by Jewish refugees. Former Austrian Jews, now Germans, were quickly put in untenable positions and left Austria *en masse*. Approximately thirty thousand emigrated. An important escape route led across Siberia to the border station of Otpor. A few miles east, Station Manchuria, was already in Manchuria/Manchukuo. After the Second World War began in 1939, tens of thousands of refugees were located in the countries around Poland. Among these, 25,000 were trapped in Lithuania, causing both economic and political headaches for their hosts. British authorities would only grant 900 visas per year to Palestine, still under a British mandate. The issue was further complicated by the complexities of getting transit visas through Latvia and Sweden to finally reach Britain or Palestine. The simplest, shortest and most secure route turned out to be via Soviet territory, but at first the Soviet authorities were not prepared to allow this transit.

A special dossier in the Foreign Ministry Archive (*Arkhiv vneshnei politiki*) provides valuable information on the international negotiations surrounding the Jewish refugees' transit from Lithuania to Japan.¹

1. АВПРФ. Ф.0146. Оп.24. П .227. Д.46

Three Soviet and four Japanese diplomats would eventually participate in the talks. Several top Soviet leaders were involved in decision-making, including, Stalin, the Foreign Minister Viacheslav Molotov, the Foreign Trade Minister Anastas Mikoian and Deputy Foreign Ministers Vladimir Dekanozov, Andrei Vyshinskii and Solomon Lozovskii. The head of State Security (NKVD) Vsevolod Merkulov also gave his blessings to the proposed transit operation. Sugihara is referred to directly, as the Japanese consul in Kaunas, but not by name, in several Soviet documents.² These diplomatic documents and those from other Russian archives illuminate the motivations of the various actors behind the final decision to allow the transit operation.

First of all, the very first initiatives for a refugee transit route – via Odessa to Haifa- originated with the government of independent Lithuania. Already starting in late 1939, the Lithuanian authorities raised the issue of the Jewish refugees, offering to provide them with Lithuanian papers, if necessary, and pointing out the profitability of the operation for the Soviet side, if the matter was handled by Intourist, the Soviet tourism monopoly. Dekanozov met with the Lithuanian ambassador L. Natkevichius on 17 April, 10 May and 1 June 1940.³ At this stage, there was no mention of a “Japanese transit,” but all those who would later agree to this were already in the loop about the advisability of a pathway through Soviet territory to save Jewish refugees.

Second, the Soviet side followed its own economic and security interests in approving the transit. It is no coincidence that on 21 April 1940 the main supporter of the transit idea, Dekanozov, who had pre-

2. It is unclear if in 1940–1941, the Soviet authorities made the connection between the Russian-speaking Japanese consul in Kaunas, who had arrived from Helsinki, and Sugihara, the Japanese Russia-hand at Harbin, who had been denied his posting to Moscow. For more on Harbin, see the essay by Professor Takao in this volume.

3. *СССР и Литва в годы Второй мировой войны: сборник документов / Институт истории Литвы, Институт всеобщей истории Российской академии наук; сост.: А. Каспаравичюс, Ч. Лауринавичюс, Н.С. Лебедева. Т. 1: СССР и Литовская Республика (март 1939 — август 1940 гг.). — Вильнюс: Изд-во Института истории Литвы, 2006. — С.490, 551,536*

viously headed Soviet foreign espionage, not only wrote to Molotov about the 1.5 million dollars to be made, but also about the approval of the plan by Soviet security organs. (Doc.28). Molotov's answer called for further examination of the means to accomplish the task and could easily be understood as a go-ahead signal. But nothing further happened until the Lithuanian government was cut out of the equation by the arrival of Soviet troops, with Dekanozov at their head, in June 1940. A month later, after hasty Communist-led elections, the new Communist-dominated parliament voted to "rejoin" the Soviet Union and Baltic independence foundered for fifty years. On July 25, Dekanozov, together with the Soviet emissary in Lithuania, N.G. Pozdniakov, sent a telegram to Communist Party headquarters in the Kremlin proposing approval of refugee transit. (Doc.31)

At the present time in Lithuania, in particular in the city of Vilnius, a large number of Jewish refugees from former Poland have accumulated. Some of these refugees have Polish passports and most of them have "safe-conduct" documents provided by the Lithuanian government. There are around 800 such refugees... Leaving them in Lithuania is not desirable; Therefore, we consider it appropriate and urgent to permit their transit through the USSR in groups of 50 to 100 persons.

Dekanozov, who had only two months earlier projected large profits based on an estimate of three to five thousand refugees, was clearly playing down the numbers in order to get approval, which took the form of a Politburo decision, signed by Stalin, taken on 29 July 1940. (Doc.33)

In this manner, the Soviet authorities, following their own understanding of their own interests, both in Lithuania and more broadly, untied Sugihara's hands regarding the issuance of visas. The backdoor to the East was now open. It is enough to look at the dates on the "Sugihara List" (Appendix) to see a significant acceleration in Sugihara's pace starting on July 25, with visa issuance becoming massive on July 29, the day Dekanozov would have learned of the Politburo's approval.

It is hard to escape the conclusion that Sugihara and Dekanozov were in contact, if only indirectly. But we still have no direct proof.

But the position of Japan might still have prevented the refugee exodus. In this context, it is important to put the Soviet materials described above together with the Japanese Foreign Ministry materials⁴, as we have done in this collection. As we can see, Sugihara's first telegram regarding visas is dated 28 July 1940. Before that Sugihara had issued several dozen visas on his own authority, but now he realized that a positive Politburo decision would open the door to saving hundreds, maybe thousands. This was the moment when he tried to convince his Ministry to allow him to issue transit visas. His telegram, calculated for the known anti-Soviet attitude of his boss, the Foreign Minister Matsuoka Yosuke, reports the sad and violent story of the Soviet takeover of Lithuania by punitive organs, the arrests of thousands of Poles and Jews, the confiscation of membership lists of political organizations, and the sending of former government members and their families to Moscow as virtual prisoners. Finally, he mentions that many Jews (around one hundred per day) were lining up at his consulate, because the Japanese transit visa would allow them to cross Soviet territory to Japan and then America, thereby escaping likely death or imprisonment. There were no questions in this telegram, so there was no reply.

Ten days later, Sugihara again raised the issue of transit visas in connection with Polish industrialists, who wished to stay a full month in Japan. Matsuoka responded promptly approving issuance, leaving length of stay to be decided on arrival. But Sugihara must have felt blocked when the Foreign Minister concluded the telegram by requiring strict observance of all transit visa issuance rules for all future cases. By this time, Sugihara had already issued over 1000 visas, many in violation of the rules.⁵

4. See: Shiraishi Masaaki. *Sugihara Chiune: The Duty and Humanity of an Intelligence Officer*. Translated by Gaynor Sekimori. -Tokyo, Japan Publishing Industry Foundation, 2021.

5. Matsuoka had cabled restrictive rules to Japanese ambassadors in Europe on July 23 (Doc. 30), but we do not know if Sugihara received a copy of this telegram from the Berlin embassy. Since the Kaunas consulate was a *de facto* observation post,

He must have felt even worse when the following telegram No. 22 arrived only two days later on 16 August 1940, the same day on which the number of visas he had issued since late July passed 1800.

Recently among the Lithuanians who possess transit visas issued by you, travelling to America and Canada, there are several who do not possess enough money and who have not finished their procedure to receive their entry visa to the destination country. We cannot give them permission to land. And there are several instances where we do not know what to do. So in regards to refugees, please be sure that they have finished their procedure for their entry visa to the destination country and they possess enough money to travel and stay while in Japan. Otherwise, you should not give them the transit visas.

Matsuoka's instructions were crystal clear, but they had already been broken many times over.

Sugihara's response to No. 22 in his own telegram No. 67 (incorrectly dated August 1) made clear that his transit visas were the only hope of many refugees to escape the double closing trap, first of a Soviet take-over and then of a looming Soviet-German war that he himself was perfectly placed to predict. "We need to take these circumstances into consideration," he wrote. "I am issuing visas only to the persons whose backgrounds are guaranteed by reliable people... Since I am issuing visas contingent upon compliance with all of the above-mentioned conditions, I demand that you refuse boarding at Vladivostok to those who have not completed these procedures." In this way did Sugihara place the final execution of his humanitarian act in the hands of Acting Consul General Nei Saburo at Vladivostok, his former schoolmate in Harbin.

Matsuoka replied curtly to No. 67 on September 3, (suggesting that the correct date for No. 67 was September 1, rather than August 1). "From now on please keep strictly in accordance with the conditions

there was no reason for Ambassador Kurusu to expect visas to be issued there.

of telegram No. 22.” This time Sugihara could comply, as he himself departed Kaunas on September 4. The Soviet subjugation of the Baltic states continued in Sugihara’s absence, while the actual mechanisms for mass transit only began to operate in the early winter.

Only in early February as alarming numbers of refugees began to embark in Vladivostok for Japan did Matsuoka renew the correspondence, this time wanting to know exactly how many visas had been issued. Although Matsuoka received an answer on the next day, the number of refugees who actually made use of Sugihara visas to save their lives remains a contested issue even today. What do the new Soviet documents have to contribute to this discussion?

In the Russian Foreign Ministry’s 29 April 1941 internal Informational Note (*spravka*) on the refugee issue, it is noted that “in August 1940 the Japanese consul in Lithuania gave a significant quantity (*znachitel’noe kolichestvo*) of transit visas good for one year to Jewish refugee emigrants, leaving Lithuania for America.” (Doc.68) The exact number of visas issued by Sugihara cannot be found in Soviet diplomatic documents. But the Japanese Foreign Ministry has the list mentioned above, as sent by Sugihara to Tokyo on 5 February 1941. This list holds 2139 names, including seven Soviet citizens. A total of ten countries are represented, but almost all are Poles with Lithuanians in second place. Despite the list, the numbers 6000 and 10,000 have also been used with the argument that each visa could be used for a family and therefore many children were saved with their parents’ visas. False visas may also have delivered salvation. What do the Soviet documents have to say about these hypotheses and the actual number?

First of all, Intourist, the Soviet “company” responsible for transportation by train from Vilnius to Moscow and from Moscow to Vladivostok, including hotel stays in both cities, kept careful statistics for 1940. According to these statistics, 1472 people made the trip to Vladivostok from Lithuania of whom 242 were foreigners who sought visas from consulates in Moscow. The remaining 1230 were probably all refugees with Sugihara visas as shown in the chart in Document 70. The Intourist report for 1941 is less thorough and probably less reliable,

since collecting statistics on tourism was a lower priority by the end of the year, as the country and its citizens fought the Nazis desperately for their very right to exist. Nonetheless, statistics for January and February total 1500 transit passengers from Lithuania to Vladivostok. (Doc. 72) There were no transits originating in Latvia or Estonia. This brings us to around 2700 clients served from Lithuania to Vladivostok in late 1940 and the first two months of 1941. Unfortunately, there are no further statistics for 1941 that would indicate the number of passengers from Lithuania to Vladivostok, but we do know that additional boats travelled to Japan in March. For example, the Amakusa-maru left Vladivostok on March 2 with 416 refugees on board. (Doc.68) By early April, the migration had ended.⁶

Twenty-seven hundred is already over 500 individuals higher than the number of visas issued, according to the list Sugihara submitted to his Ministry in February 1941. Clearly, counting actual human beings who crossed Siberia on transit visas has produced a number larger than the number of visas issued. Can the Russian documents which have produced this contradiction resolve it as well?

First, let us consider the hypothesis that the additional travelers were children, making use of their parents' Sugihara visas. This idea was tenable until Intourist transit passenger statistics became available. Now we know that children over ten were charged full tariff and are included in the adult statistics. Children between five and ten were eligible for a special children's price and those under five rode for free with their parents. (Doc.54) For the first half of 1941 only 85 transit tick-

6. Intourist documents provide other statistics on transit passengers, but they are not Vladivostok specific. Document 72 states that a total of 3599 transits were processed in the first half of 1941 for the whole USSR, while Document 73 counts 2986 transit passengers on the Trans-Siberian railroad in the first quarter of 1941, without differentiating between those who crossed into Manchukuo at the Otpor border crossing and those who proceeded to Vladivostok. In 1940, according to Document 70, 79% of transit passengers followed the Otpor route. None of these statistics support higher estimates of the number of Sugihara survivors, such as 6000 or 10,000. For the "statistical extrapolation" by which the sociologist Hillel Levine concluded that 10,000 is a "reasonable estimate," see Levine, 7, 285–6 fn.7.

ets were sold at the children's price, including all directions of travel, not only Vladivostok. (Doc.70) A report dated 7 June 1941 from the Kobe Jewish community to the American Jewish Congress from the AJC's representative in Japan, Dr. Moise Moiseff, counts 1046 refugees in Kobe, of whom only 57 were children.⁷ In contrast to many early claims, the Intourist materials clarify that children were a small group among the refugees and cannot account for the discrepancy between the number of visas Sugihara issued and claims that larger numbers of Jews were saved.⁸

A second line of argument appears to be more productive. Lithuanian materials published in this collection trace the course of a criminal investigation undertaken by the Soviet security services in Lithuania into the forgery of Sugihara visas. A report dated March 10 stated that 492 fake visas had been discovered so far and 94 implicated individuals (81 Jews, 9 Poles, 3 Lithuanians and a Czech) were arrested. (Doc.53) Assuming that these forgeries had been underway since Sugihara's departure in September, it is likely that hundreds of Jews and Poles managed to escape to Vladivostok alongside those with genuine Sugihara visas.

Whether genuine or fake, all visa holders paid for Intourist's services leading to a sharp increase in Intourist's 1940 hard currency earnings over 1939, thanks to the doubling of the number of transit passengers. (Doc.70) In order to provide service to this contingent, a "special Intourist office" was set up in Kaunas to sell tickets and tours for hard currency. Although Dekanozov's original projections were never realized (for 3000 to 5000 refugees), over US\$800,000 was grossed by Intourist.

Intourist was not the only Soviet organ interested in the transit passengers. The NKVD also seems to have considered this group a natu-

7. Yad Vashem Archive, Zorach Warhaftig collection, 24–25.

8. Although there are several documented cases where multiple people did, in fact, travel on one Sugihara visa, this appears to have been quite exceptional. Pamela Rotner Sakamoto, *Japanese Diplomats and Jewish Refugees: A World War II Dilemma* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1998), 113. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum website suggests that as many as 300 "others" may have travelled on Sugihara visas, but no evidence is provided. <https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005594>

ral hunting ground for the recruitment of a foreign network of spies that would soon be far and wide in the world. Reports of these risks, both for the vulnerable refugees and the countries that might take them in, were soon highlighted in American, British and Polish diplomatic correspondence.⁹ No evidence has emerged to suggest that this Soviet espionage initiative achieved any successes, unlike the financial rewards that were real enough.

Sugihara's correspondence with his Ministry in Tokyo was masterful in its indirection. A careful reading of the 28 July 1940 telegram tells us that over 100 Jews a day were asking for his visa and indeed, the next day July 29 would be the first day on which Sugihara issued over 100 visas (Visas 69–188). Twice more during August 1940 Sugihara's questions to Tokyo about visa procedures involved Jews. In hindsight, Tokyo might have guessed that Sugihara had issued many visas and that most of them had gone to Jews. But only as the number of refugees in Vladivostok mounted and as the number of Jews in Japan who had failed to depart increased did Tokyo take notice.

By February 4 Foreign Minister Matsuoka had reached this conclusion and wrote to Sugihara in Prague: "Please cable immediately the number of Jewish refugees to whom you issued visas when you were Acting Consul at Kaunas." (Doc.57) Sugihara's response that only "about 1500" of the 2132 visas were to Jews was probably a surprise for the Foreign Ministry, which then checked through the Tokyo embassy by having Secretary Saito ask Soviet consular section official Zarubin on February 22 if all of the emigrants were Jews. Zarubin responded that the "great majority" of the emigrants were Jewish. (Docs. 58 and 62) On March 12, the Japanese Ambassador at Moscow Tatekawa reported to Tokyo that the Soviet consular section had estimated 2000–3000 refugees in Moscow of whom "the majority" had visas from Kaunas.¹⁰

Several circumstances stand out in this transit visa story. Aside

9. 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), 9, 298 fn.11; Sakamoto, 140.

10. Sakamoto, 147.

from indubitably humanitarian aims to help the refugees, Sugihara was interested in extending his stay in Kaunas as long as possible. The visa issuance process gave him an extra month in Soviet Lithuania, even as other diplomats attributed to the former government departed. Sugihara also had to avoid offending Japan's German ally. The reason for issuing the visas was the potential danger that the refugees faced of Soviet persecution, very much in line with the anti-Comintern pact. Helping Jews leave Europe in no way contradicted Japanese-German "friendship" as at this stage the "solution to the Jewish question" meant ethnic cleansing by forced migration, rather than genocide. Also, as noted above, the issuance of visas accelerated from 25 July 1940, the very day on which Dekanozov asked the Politburo's permission to transport the refugees to Japan. This suggests Sugihara had accurate insider knowledge of Soviet decision-making, although we do not know the details. Sugihara's expert knowledge of these circumstances and motivations made it possible for him to save thousands of lives.

The Soviet Union also had its reasons for issuing transit visas to complement the Japanese and Dutch transit permits in the personal papers of Poles and Jews. Intourist's services produced badly needed hard currency in a terrible year for tourism. Removing refugees who would never be productive Soviet citizens, in particular the members of religious yeshivas and bourgeois elites, was also an important goal for the new Soviet authorities in Lithuania. Finally, the special interest of Soviet intelligence services in recruiting agents who might soon establish themselves in the US or Palestine or elsewhere should not be ignored, although this collection sheds no additional light on this potential motivation from within Soviet security services. All of these factors together, both personal and institutional, conspired to save thousands of potential Holocaust victims, escaping mere months before the great bloodbath began. More than 95% of the Jews located on Lithuanian territory in June 1941 were murdered during the three years of Nazi occupation.

Even in the Soviet documents, where the name of Consul Sugihara never appears, his central role stands out in catalyzing a humanitarian operation that involved international cooperation on a rare scale

and among individuals and institutions with no previous record of cooperation. Not only was his personal deed, signing the visas in their thousands, one of risk and courage, but his ability to bring together Dutch, Japanese, Lithuanian, Polish and Soviet inputs to a benevolent cause illustrates an almost unique intellect and persona. Faced with the gathering darkness of anti-Semitism and the approaching Holocaust, Sugihara's bright example shines a light that we should never forget. Following Sugihara's achievement beyond borders, the Moscow Holocaust Research Center has worked with colleagues around the world to produce this document collection to broaden our knowledge of the lifesaving transit across Siberia from the Baltic to the Pacific.