

**FROM THE DECEMBER 14, 1995 TESTIMONY OF SOLI GANOR**

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**Tape 1. Time: 1:35**

**Translated by Marta Wassertzug, February 6, 2006**

**Meeting with Sugihara, Japanese consul in Kovno, Lithuania**

It was Chanukah 1939. I was then 11-years old. It was very cold, and Kovno was covered in snow. On the windows of the Jews, the holiday candles burnt; among the Christians, you could see their Christmas trees.

I remember that at the Metropolitan (I still remember the name) they were showing a new Laurel and Hardy movie, which I loved a lot, and that I wanted to see. Now, what happened? The money I had received for Chanukah, I had given away! (My mother was active in a women's group that collected money for the refugees.) In an impulse, I gave them all the money I had received (which was a lot!) Now, I was left with no money for the movie! I asked myself: "what do I do now?" I had an aunt who was very generous, a single woman, Anushka. She had a store that supplied hard-to-find groceries and other items to diplomats (in the city.) It was like a "gourmet shop". I went to my aunt's store-it was my last hope for a little money in this gray, cold day. When I got to the store, I saw she was talking to a man dressed in a very elegant, striped, official-looking suit. I looked at him and saw he had strange-looking, slanted eyes. I looked at him for a while, with some curiosity, and finally my aunt told me: "It is not nice to stare. Please meet the Japanese consul, Mr. Kuni Sugihara." I approached him; he smiled at me and extended his hand. I immediately felt some chemistry between us. Here was I, an 11-years old child, and he was an adult, probably in his 40s. He looked foreign: I had never seen a Japanese person before in my life! But he exuded warmth, and had a smile in his eyes. I felt his goodness. We spoke Russian (he spoke it well) and then my aunt said: "I am sure you came for your Chanukah money". (She had already given some to me, but she made believe as though she forgot.) I said that I wanted to go to the movies, and gave away all my money. She said: "I heard, I heard". So, she went to the register to bring some money, and he said: "You know, for your Chanukah holiday, I can also give you some money". I said: "I cannot take money from strangers, only family." "So, he said, you know what: I will be your Japanese uncle." And he gave me the money. I laughed and took it! And suddenly something odd came to my mind, and I told him: "If you are my uncle, why don't you come to us, to our family's Chanukah get-together on Saturday?" I said that jokingly; my aunt did not believe I had said such a thing! He invites the consul just like that?! He laughed and then he said: "I really never attended such an event. It would be interesting!" My aunt did not know what to say. Finally, she said: "If you are willing to come, we will be happy to welcome you". And, what do you know, that Saturday night he and his wife Yukiko came to our home, to the Chanukah party! We lit candles, and he was very taken with the whole thing, including the Chanukah songs... There were many children there, (my cousins,) and he felt very comfortable. There were no communication problems: he spoke Russian and German; she spoke German too, so that the conversation flowed. And then, he got the first inkling of an idea for his visas. What happened?

This refugee, Rosenblatt, who was spending a few days in my home, approached him. (This was 1939, 6 months before he began extending his visas,) and said: "Is it possible to get a visa to Japan? No one wants to give us one: we are stuck here, and are afraid this is a real problem and we would like to leave". Sugihara just looked at him. It wasn't a practical idea: they (the Japanese) were allied with the Germans and the Italians, they were the axis Tokyo, Berlin, Roma. Then he laughed and asked him: "And what will you do in Japan?" The whole idea seemed ridiculous to him: it was as though a Jew asked the Germans for a visa to Germany. But I think that that was the kernel of the idea...

**Interviewer:** Did you hear this conversation?

**Soli:** Yes! My father was very upset that the refugee bothered Sugihara, and also thought that the idea was ridiculous: to have asked the Japanese consul for a visa?!

**Interviewer:** And what did Sugihara answer?

**Soli:** He laughed. Also said he would never receive permission from Tokyo to issue visas and that, furthermore, it did not seem like a good country for the Jews to go to.

We became good friends with Sugihara and, since I collected stamps and we lived not far from the Consulate, he would put together an envelope of stamps for me. I remember that also through us he met many of my relatives in Lithuania. Sugihara was an intelligence officer. What did he look for in Lithuania? He needed to collect information...

**Interviewer:** How do you know?

**Soli:** Afterwards I found out. But it was strange. In October 1939, he arrived from Helsinki, and before he arrived there had never been a Japanese consul in Lithuania. He was immediately suspected of being an intelligence officer for the Japanese army. And Lithuania was between Russia and Germany and Poland, a good place to gather information.

Now, what happened with him is that we became friendly... with his wife too. I met his children, ages 5 and 2. (I was 11.) You know, by the way, the little one finished college here (in Israel.) He got a scholarship here from...well, it is not relevant at this point: I will talk about this later.

What happened after that visit is that my father asked him for advice. I remember this....My father told him that he has an American visa...and this was before the Russians invaded Lithuania. My father asked him: "What do you think about it?" I remember his answer was very short. (My father said :) "I have many businesses here." He answered: "I wouldn't pay attention to the business at all today". It seemed that he already had information about what was happening. To my father, the answer was shocking. He came home and told my mother that the answer had been "Japanese like", very short. And even with that, they did not take the advice. They thought: "Ah, what does he know?" and, what a pity: had we taken his advice we would have been in America when it was still possible to leave...

In June 1940, the Russians invaded. Suddenly, the "refugee's situation" (including those who were among us) became an issue...There were some who left for Africa, and other places: those who had money. Most of them stayed and did not know what to-do. The Russians ordered all the Kovno consulates closed.

Sugihara spoke fluent Russian. In his youth he had studied in Mongolia (while the Japanese were occupying it.) He also married a Russian woman while there. Later, he divorced her. He spoke Russian fluently. He was in very good terms with a former Russian consul who, when the Russians invaded, became a high official in the governing

body of Lithuania. And he (and many people don't know it,) spoke with the Russian official. Because, you see, issuing visas to the Jews, what would it have accomplished? Then, all of Europe was already closed and the only place to go through was Russia. And why would they allow transit through there to the Jews? So, Sugihara spoke with his Russian friend and said:"Listen, this is the situation". (When all the consuls were ordered out (of Kovno) he-Sugihara-asked to stay.)

**Interviewer:** Do you remember the name of the Russian friend?

**Soli:** I think it was Anatoly or something like that. He had been the Russian consul in Lithuania...He (Sugihara) was a "drinking buddy" with the Russians, and were good friends. And I know for a fact that he spoke to him about it. And he asked a special favor from the Russians: an extension of his stay in Kovno. And the Polish Jewish refugees saw he was the only one remaining and came to him (among them Zorach Warhaftig) ... in groups to request visas. He sent a few telegrams to Tokyo about it, and they said:" What for? Are you out of your mind"?

He told us they asked him what was this idea that would cause them trouble with the Germans. It was a totally negative answer.

**Interviewer:** When did he tell you about it?

**Soli:** He told us... In essence, he met with my father several times, and with my uncles in Kovno, and he told us he was trying to obtain permission (for the visas) Many young Jews...from the Telshe yeshiva were stuck in Lithuania. .. from Holland. They came to Kovno to get advice from the Dutch consul. In the meantime, the consul had left! But there was a representative from the Phillips Company and the consul had left the visa stamp with him, with permission to use it. So, the young people came to the representative who began to think what to do with these Dutch men. Finally he said: "You know what? I have an idea. There are a few places in the Caribbean that belong to Holland. The Germans did not invade them, as they are too close to America. Maybe you can go there". So he gave these two yeshiva students the visas. They were (in turn) friendly with Rosenblatt (the Polish refugee who lived with us.) They also knew we were friendly with Sugihara and his family. They came to us with Rosenblatt and said:" You know him (Sugihara.) Maybe...Here we have a destination place. Maybe we can get a transit visa through Japan..." So, my father, myself and Rosenblatt and one of the yeshiva students from Holland, went to Sugihara, to the consulate. He wasn't there at the moment. His wife, Yukiko, greeted us, served us some tea, and then he arrived. He said he had been with the former Russian consul, and spoken to him. (This was after Warhaftig and another group had already spoken to him. He had been worried about it, but did not know how to solve the problem.) And here we came with the solution! We said:" Here, this boy has a visa to Surinam" So he said:"OK, then this is an end visa." And on the spot he decided "with this, even if Tokyo doesn't allow me to, I will issue the visa".

We also had the old Lithuanian passports and, on the spot, he gave us all transit visas, via Japan to Surinam (our visas to America had already expired.)

So, what happened? When everyone found out about this (of course the yeshiva student told it to all of his peers) I saw he (Sugihara) went to the window and a throng of people was there, asking for him. He motioned them, with his hat, to approach the gates.

The arrangement with the Dutch was that the representative would give them visas to Surinam and Curacao and, afterwards, they will come to the Japanese, and wait in line for

visas. The key to all of this was the Russian (former consul) who had allowed the refugees to travel through Russia...

**Interviewer:** So, three people were needed: the Phillips representative, the Japanese consul and the Russian official.

**Soli:** And I remember more. That day, when we arrived at the consulate...he had not yet received permission from the Russian. He went to the telephone and called him. I remember we sat there while the phone rang and rang. He was about to hang-up, saying: "It looks like he is not there" when, suddenly, the Russian picked up the phone, and told him that the permission had been granted. We did not hear what the Russian said, but Sugihara said: "Done!", and started issuing the visas. I think I am one of the few witnesses to what happened there.

**Interviewer:** Tell me, this matter of his giving visas to the Jews...You had met him only some six months before. Did he undergo some process of getting close to the Jews, a growing of sympathy towards them?

**Soli:** Look, he was a very nice person, trustworthy. In his relationship with me, a child, he wasn't stuck up. He would smile, give me candy, stamps. All my uncles, aunts and other Jews who met him, all of them said that he was an exceptional humanitarian: a man who was ready to sacrifice himself. He immediately knew that, if he gave visas against the wishes of a government like the Japanese, after he was told three times not to do so, he would be fired. In addition, we didn't know it at the time, but he was transferred to Berlin. It was life threatening to live there! The Germans could have killed him for issuing visas to the Jews. He did an exceptional thing. I talked to his wife, Yukiko, two years ago (when I was invited to Japan) and she said it had been a family decision...

### **Tape. 5 15:08:32**

Sugihara's is a different story than Schindler's. According to Boston University's professor Hillel Levin who, while in Tokyo found the lists of visas grantees (that had been hidden by the Japanese for a long time, as they had refused to recognize all together that such a thing existed,) according to those lists of all the people who received visas (and if not all, at least some...) And, as far as I remember, he still gave out visas when he was in a hotel or...All the time he gave visas...without registering them. So that in reality there were more people (helped) than appear in this list. And I can attest to that.

The Japanese people have one characteristic: it is a shame for them to show off. After what he did (and Sugihara really saved many people,) he disappeared. When he returned to Japan, after the war, he was dismissed from his position for not obeying orders. Which is the opposite of what he deserved for his service and talent. But, because he did not listen to his superiors and gave out visas to the Jews, he was fired.

**Interviewer:** Is that the reason?

**Soli:** This is what everyone says. Also his family...

**Interviewer:** So, why didn't they fire him in Kovno?

**Soli:** They did not know yet! In Kovno they didn't fire him because...Well, the story is a little strange...There is another question that can be asked: If they didn't allow him to issue visas, why did they allow the Jews to enter Japan? When I was in Japan lately, by Mrs. Sugihara's invitation, three years ago, we heard that that was an order from Hirohito, the emperor, himself.

**Interviewer:** To allow them to enter?

**Soli:** Even if it was not legal (after all, the visa was a visa) but he gave the order to allow the Jews to enter Japan...They could have all been sent to Vladivostok, but they let all the Jews in. All those who arrived by ship to Kobe could have been sent back, but they were not. And, according to what I heard in Tokyo recently from the highest circles, it was by order of the emperor himself. He got involved in this whole matter...But this is something else.

The reason for Sugihara's being fired upon his return, was disobedience. This is what we heard from his wife...The fact is that, recently, the Japanese government apologized to Sugihara's family.

So, he had disappeared after the war...Now you know, the survivors after the war, everyone had his own troubles, even all those who were saved by him. After the communist took power, these refugees scattered to many different places: the majority left for the US, Canada, Australia, and some also to Israel. But one survivor looked for him (many, as a matter of fact) but no one knew where he had disappeared. Sugihara himself was not one to say: "Here I am", or "I saved many Jews". Afterwards he said that what he did was in his human capacity. He had had two options: to listen to Tokyo's orders, or to go with his conscience. And he decided to go with his conscience.

There was an Israeli economic attaché in the Embassy of Israel in Tokyo in the 1960's, by the name of Nishri, or something like that. He was one of the recipients of Sugihara's visas and since he was in Tokyo, he decided to find this man. The Japanese were no help, and did not tell him where he was. They only told him he either disappeared or died. But Nishri found him in a village, Iaotsu, where Sugihara had been born, and went to him. Then, he gathered all the survivors who were still alive, and asked them to help Sugihara. They responded: "of course, of course". In sum, they brought him to Israel where, after the government heard the story, he was immediately inducted as a Righteous Gentile, received a medal and had trees planted in his honor... He was the second, after Wallenberg, to save a great number of Jews, and he and his family suffered because of that. After he had been fired from his job, at the end of the war, he peddled light bulbs house to house. Afterwards, because he was fluent in Russian, he worked for a while in Moscow, leaving his family behind, in Japan (for long periods of time.) He had much difficulty managing economically. When he came to Israel, he was surprised at his welcome, since (he thought) he had done what anyone would have done in his place...He met with (Prime Minister) Shamir, and when he was asked what the country could do for him, he requested a scholarship for his youngest son...

In 1944, I was invited to Japan. One of the wealthy people in Japan, Nikami, (who had gone to school with Sugihara) once he heard what Sugihara had done, spent millions of dollars to buy land near Sugihara's birthplace, and he built there a park: "Freedom Park". In 1994, they invited the survivors to come to the park's opening. Mrs. Sugihara remembered me as a child, and also my whole family and she invited me to come too. Since then, I am always in touch with his whole family. I met her, Mrs. Sugihara, several times in San Francisco, Los Angeles. Also, Spielberg organized for her a gala evening to which 1,500 came to dinner with the biggest stars of Hollywood, and where she received a standing ovation. Somehow, the appreciation came from the Jews in Israel and the US. She also wrote a book about the entire chapter, which was recently translated into English.

**Interviewer:** When he came here, to Israel, did you meet him?

**Soli:** I was not in Israel then, I was in San Diego.

**Interviewer:** Did you have a chance to meet him at all after the war?

**Soli:** No, like I said, I did not want to have anything to do with the Holocaust then. I was a Canadian living in Israel. It was my psychological escape...

Many of Sugihara's survivors live in New York, and became very wealthy. This past November, they invited me to a Town Hall meeting in which both Mrs. Sugihara and her son spoke. I met her there again.