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Globalizing Sugihara: Daisaku Ikeda's and Soka Gakkai's Role in Commemorating Chiune Sugihara

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ABSTRACT: Chiune Sugihara was a Japanese diplomat who in 1940 saved thousands of Jews living in Lithuania by issuing to them, without the authorization of his government, visas to go to Japan, from where they planned to go to the West. Daisaku Ikeda and Soka Gakkai have promoted the figure of Sugihara in Japan, in particular through the second version of the exhibition "The Courage to Remember," launched in 2015, and internationally. Recent criticism of what some perceive as the mythologization of Sugihara for political purposes has extended to Soka Gakkai. The article argues that the criticism is unfair and emphasizes that Ikeda saw in Sugihara a model of universal values rather than the embodiment of an alleged quintessential "Japan-ness."

KEYWORDS: Chiune Sugihara, The Courage to Remember, Soka Gakkai and Chiune Sugihara, Yad Vashem, Daisaku Ikeda.

Introduction

In 2023, a controversy erupted about Chiune Sugihara (1900–1986), a Japanese diplomat who saved the lives of thousands of Jews during World War II. A campaign was launched arguing that Sugihara was just a minor character and that his motivations were not purely humanitarian. The campaign criticized the governments of Israel, Lithuania, and Japan for having "invented" a hero, each for its own motives. Soka Gakkai was also criticized for having contributed to creating the alleged "myth" of Sugihara and having unduly compared him to Holocaust victim Anne Frank (1929–1945). Although with international echoes, this controversy happened mostly in Israel and became connected with both the war in Ukraine and the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians.

While the controversy is both historically and politically interesting, my paper aims at understanding the appreciation of Sugihara by Daisaku Ikeda (1928-2023). I will present the life and career of Sugihara according to the present

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status of the historical research about him. I will then shortly reconstruct the 2023 controversy and discuss more in depth why Ikeda and Soka Gakkai have considered Sugihara an important figure worth promoting.

Who Was Chiune Sugihara?

Chiune Sugihara was born on a very symbolic date, January 1, 1900, the first day of the new century. While the date is undisputed, where exactly he was born is not. The town of Yaotsu, in Gifu Prefecture, claims Sugihara as his most illustrious son. The town has a museum called Chiune Sugihara Memorial Hall, inaugurated in 2000, which by 2020 had received half a million visitors (Kowner 2023, 53). However, the city of Mino, also in Gifu Prefecture and located some thirty miles west of Yaotsu, also claims to be Sugihara's birthplace, with the backing of one of the diplomat's sons (Haime 2023). The uncertainties may be due to the fact that Sugihara's father worked for the Japanese Tax Administration Office and moved frequently from one city or town to another.

His dream was that his son Chiune, a bright student, might become a medical doctor. Chiune, however, was looking for a more international profession. He deliberately failed the entrance exam to medical school and went to study languages at Tokyo's Waseda University, becoming proficient in English and Russian (and later German). After his military service, he passed the exam of the Foreign Ministry in 1922 and became a diplomat. He was stationed in Harbin, the largest city of the Japanese-controlled Manchukuo state, where he converted to the Russian Orthodox Church and married a Russian woman, Klaudia Semionovna Apollonova (1870–1930). They divorced shortly before he left Harbin to be reposted to Helsinki and then, in 1939, to Kaunas, which was at that time the capital of independent Lithuania, where he served as the representative of Japan with the title of Vice Consul. In the meantime, he had married a Japanese woman, Yukiko Kikuchi (1913–2008), from whom he will have four sons. He remained a devotee of the Russian Orthodox Church, to which Yukiko also converted (Levine 1996, 67–9).

There is some evidence that in Kaunas Sugihara also worked for the Japanese intelligence service, analyzing for Tokyo the political situation of the Baltic States, Poland, and Russia (Krebs 2017, 123–24). As Japanese Vice Consul in Kaunas, he entered history in 1940, at a time when Lithuania was occupied by the Soviet

Union, but under threat of an imminent attack and occupation by Nazi Germany. Jews who lived in Lithuania—both Lithuanians and Poles who had escaped the Nazi occupation of Poland—were looking for a way of leaving Lithuania. So were non-Jews who also feared persecution for political reasons. To understand the role of Japan, we should consider that we were in 1940, a time when almost nobody in the world was ready to help the persecuted Jews.

Jan Zwartendijk (1896–1976) was the consul of the Dutch government in exile in Kaunas. That government did not control the Netherlands, occupied by Germany, but did control the Netherlands Antilles in the Caribbean. He was willing to stamp the Jews' passports with a "safe-conduct" stating they will be welcome in the Netherlands Antilles, which did not require an entry visa. However, the only possible way to reach the Netherlands Antilles avoiding Germany and German-occupied lands was by going East and sailing from China or Japan. The Dutch consul enrolled the help of his Japanese colleague Sugihara, who started issuing visas to the Jews. This happened without the authorization of the Japanese government, which Sugihara was prepared to disobey, since his priority was helping the persecuted. How many he saved is a matter of discussion. Japanese archives include 2,140 files (Kowner 2023, 36) but it is possible that he issued many more visas without sending records to Tokyo and the total number was as high as 6,000 (Sugihara 1995).

It is important to note that Lithuania was not occupied by the Nazis at that time. It was occupied by the Soviets. Jews were afraid that Nazis might soon come but, as even critics of Sugihara recognize, "they were invariably worried about the Soviets" (Kowner 2023, 35). The Soviet Union had annexed Lithuania and offered to the Jews, including the refugees from Poland, the alternative between becoming Soviet citizens or be relocated to Siberia. Becoming a Soviet citizen meant for adult men to be immediately drafted in the Red Army, which was not an option for some 2,000 *yeshiva* (rabbinical school) students. So, Sugihara helped the Jews in Lithuania to escape *both* the Soviets who were already there and the Nazis who might soon arrive. Armed with Sugihara's visas, thousands left Lithuania. Some were able to reach the Netherlands Antilles, others were held by Japan in a refugee camp in Shanghai from where they were liberated by the Allies at the end of the war and granted American visas to go to the United States.

Sugihara was transferred to Kaliningrad in September 1940 after the Kaunas Consulate was closed on August 29, then to Prague and to Bucharest, where the advancing Soviet Army arrested him (Levine 1996, 271–76). He was liberated in 1946 but dismissed from Japan's Foreign Ministry in 1947. Whether this happened because of the downsizing of Japan's diplomacy after the war or (as Sugihara himself perceived it) as a punishment for disobeying Tokyo's orders is a matter of controversy (Levine 1996, 276). What is certain is that the once wealthy Sugihara had to take "odd jobs" to survive, including as salesclerk in a Ginza department store (Levine 1996, 277).

When Japan re-established commercial relations with the Soviet Union in 1960, Sugihara was able to obtain a more well-paid job as representative of Japanese companies in Moscow, where he remained for fifteen years, putting to good use his perfect command of the Russian language and knowledge of how Soviet bureaucracy worked. He got a visa only for himself. Although he was allowed to visit periodically his wife and children in Japan, their relations became "strained" (Levine 1996, 278). By 1975, Sugihara was experiencing health problems, and he retired in Kamakura, Japan, where he died on July 31, 1986, and is buried.

After the end of his diplomatic career, not many knew Sugihara's whereabouts. When sociologist Hillel Levine, who published in 1996 the first comprehensive biography of Sugihara, visited the former diplomat's Russian first wife Klaudia, who had ended up in a nursing home, in Sydney, Australia, she told him her ex-husband was dead (Levine 1996, 67). In 1964, a Japanese scholar who had helped the Jews Sugihara had sent to Japan, Abraham Kotsuji (1899–1973), wrote in his autobiography that the diplomat had "disappeared, possibly assassinated by the Germans" (Kotsuji 1964, 160).

Those whose lives had been saved by Sugihara, however, had not forgotten him. Some tried to discover whether he was still alive. In 1968, Yeoshua Nishri (1919-1991), who had been one of Sugihara's beneficiaries as a child, came to Tokyo to work as economic attaché at the Israeli Embassy. Through Japan's Foreign Ministry, he was able to locate Sugihara in Moscow and had him invited to Israel in 1969 to receive an award. Alerted by Nishri, hundreds who had been saved by him joined in asking that Sugihara be honored by the Yad Vashem, Israel's official center for the remembrance of the Holocaust, with the title of "Righteous Among the Nations," conferred to non-Jews who saved Jews from the Nazi persecution. The Yad Vashem denied the title to Sugihara in 1968, since at

that time it was only conferred to those who had "risked their lives" to save Jews. By 1984, the criteria had changed to include those who had put their careers in jeopardy, and Sugihara got the title (Kowner 2017).

Both the Yad Vashem honor and the discussions preceding it were crucial for the fame of Sugihara in Israel and among the Jewish diasporas. In Japan, however, not many knew him before a series of seven articles was published in 1982 in the popular *Shukan Sankei* weekly, followed by a documentary film by Fuji Television Network in 1983 (Kowner 2023, 42–3). While books and movies continued to be published, Sugihara's fame and honor extended to Lithuania only in the 21st century. Obviously Sugihara, who had denounced the Soviet mistreatment of the Jews, could not be mentioned in Soviet times. Only after independence Lithuanians "discovered" and embraced Sugihara and eventually museums, monuments, and gardens were inaugurated. 2020 was even proclaimed the "Year of Sugihara," although several initiatives had to be cancelled due to the COVID pandemic.

The 2023 Sugihara Controversy

In March 2023 an important scholarly journal, the *American Historical Review*, published an article by University of Haifa's professor Rotem Kowner. The article (Kowner 2023) was advertised as an "event" and was covered by non-specialized media in Israel (Haime 2023), the United States (Medoff 2023), and China (see Ryall 2023), although to the best of my knowledge had no echo in Japan.

Kowner, who had published a much more moderate article on the issue in 2017 in a Lithuanian journal (Kowner 2017), criticized both Sugihara and the motivations of those who promoted his "cult" (Kowner 2023, 44). The Israeli academic argued that Sugihara's was "a minor episode" (Kowner 2023, 32), that he rescued the Jews not from the Nazis but from the Soviets and had anti-Soviet prejudices, and that his motivations "remain obscure" (Kowner 2023, 38).

Kowner does not refrain from mentioning gossip, as he reports based on interviews with Japanese Foreign Ministry officers he conducted in 2019 (i.e., eighty years after the events), that there were "rumors" among Japanese diplomats that Sugihara "profited financially" from helping the Jews. The scholar admits that

these rumors are "without substantial proof," yet he insists they are "not improbable" (Kowner 2023, 39). He also criticizes Sugihara "apologists" for not reporting that he worked for Japanese intelligence and that he abandoned his wife and sons when he went to work in Moscow in 1960 (which may explain why the only surviving son of the diplomat expressed a cautious support for some of Kowner's theories: Haime 2023).

All these claims may be disputed. That Sugihara made money by issuing his visas is just unsupported slander. Saving several thousand human beings is not "minor," and while his first wife was both Russian and "anti-Bolshevik" (Levine 1996, 87), Sugihara could not have been a fanatical anti-Soviet if he was allowed to live and work helping Japanese business companies in Soviet Moscow for fifteen years. Certainly, he was a Japanese diplomat and worked for his country. But the fact is that, as Kowner admits, the Jews in Lithuania were harassed, ill-treated, and threatened by the Soviets, although certainly the Nazis were responsible of the worst carnages.

A large part of Kowner's article is devoted to explaining why, in his opinion, three countries–Israel, Japan, and Lithuania–"manipulated" the Sugihara story (Kowner 2023, 34) and promoted it. He uses repeatedly the word "camouflage" (Kowner 2023, 39, 62). He argued that Japan needed Sugihara to "camouflage" its own war crimes and alliance with Nazi Germany and show to the world that Japanese, or at least Japanese diplomats, cared for human rights. Lithuania needed to "camouflage" the cooperation of Lithuanians with the Nazi exterminations of Jews and had also a vested interest in criticizing the Soviet Union. Israel by honoring Sugihara tried to ingratiate the Japanese public opinion and "camouflage" its own atrocities against the Palestinians.

This part of the article is heavily political. It is certainly true that Japanese, Lithuanian Nazi collaborators, and Israelis all committed atrocities, but how commemorating Sugihara may effectively "camouflage" them is unclear. Another Israeli scholar, Mordecai Paldiel, the former head of Yad Vashem's Department of the Righteous Among the Nations, answered by stating that he "was present at the relevant meetings" of Yad Vashem when the decision to honor Sugihara was adopted, while Kowner "wasn't there." Paldiel insisted that any suggestion that the Yad Vashem's decision was politically motivated is ridiculous, that hundreds of documents about Sugihara were examined, and that the article

"makes one wonder why Kowner seems to be personally so uncomfortable with the recognition of Sugihara's good deeds" (Medoff 2023).

Without speculating on Kowner's motivations, we can perhaps note that what was born as an academic controversy made it to the general media and continued to be debated within a context where both the Visas for Life organization, founded by the Sugihara family, and the Chiune Sugihara Memorial Hall in Yaotsu have come under criticism for having collected money to support Ukraine after the Russian invasion (Haime 2023), something that it was argued was not part of their mandate, while Russia had become more sensitive to any criticism of Soviet behavior during World War II and beyond. And of course the controversy continues in the context of the events in Gaza, with the risk of making Sugihara a victim of collateral damage caused by events that have nothing to do with him.

Kowner's criticism also targets Soka Gakkai and Soka University, which co-hosted with the Simon Wiesenthal Center the second edition of the exhibition "The Courage to Remember" that toured Japan since 2015 and presented together Sugihara and Anne Frank. Kowner finds the "confusing proximity" of Frank, a victim, with Sugihara, a diplomat for a Germany's ally, offensive. Kowner claims that it was Soka University that "insisted" with the Simon Wiesenthal Center to include Sugihara and that one of the aims was to create

> a useful diversion that allows ordinary Japanese to identify with a wartime humanitarian compatriot and be proud of him... as they avoid a full acknowledgment of their own historical wrongdoings in Asia (Kowner 2023, 56).

This criticism was demonstrably wrong.

Daisaku Ikeda and Sugihara

In 1993, Daisaku Ikeda was the first Japanese who visited the Museum of Tolerance, created by the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Los Angeles, even before it was open to the general public (Ikeda 1996). In 1996, he gave a speech there commemorating Anne Frank. He mentioned the Buddhist teaching on "righteous anger," which is not "self-absorbed emotionalism" but condemns evil and "reforms and rejuvenates society." He expressed this anger both against the Nazis who killed Anne Frank and against the "Japanese militarism" that had imprisoned both the founder of Soka Gakkai, Tsunesaburo Makiguchi (1871–1944), who

died in jail in 1944, and his successor Josei Toda (1900–1958), Ikeda's mentor (Ikeda 1996). He denounced Japan's "military fascism" and clearly did not use Anne Frank to divert attention from the Japanese forms of disregard for human rights—quite the opposite.

Nor did he or Soka Gakkai use Sugihara for this purpose. There are two main sources for Ikeda's assessment of Sugihara. The first is a conversation collected in *Discussions on Youth*, whose English edition was first published in 1998. Ikeda tells the basic facts of Sugihara's story. However, the focus is not on the good heart of Sugihara, but on the shortcomings of the Japanese government, who tried to derail his humanitarian effort. Sugihara's bravery was in disobeying a government that he served and respected but whose instructions on the visa issue he regarded as morally wrong.

According to Ikeda,

> Mr. Sugihara asked the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs three times to give him the green light to issue the visas, but each time the ministry refused. He was deeply troubled but finally came to a decision. "I couldn't abandon those who have come to me for help. If I did, I will be turning my back on God. " So, he ignored the orders and issued the visas... (Ikeda 2010, 86).

Ikeda goes on to blame "problems within the Japanese educational system," which had existed "since the Meiji Restoration" (1868) for the authorities in Tokyo's failure to compassionately understand the problems of the Jews in 1940 (Ikeda 2010, 86). Rather than using the story of Sugihara for glorifying Japan, what he did becomes an opportunity for discussing Japanese problems and shortcomings.

The second set of references to Sugihara by Ikeda comes from his 2016 yearly Peace Proposal. There, he gave a key to understanding the spirit of the second version of the exhibition "The Courage to Remember" organized with the Simon Wiesenthal Center by Soka University in cooperation with the Soka Gakkai Peace Committee. The first version of the exhibition had toured Japan between 1994 and 2007, visiting seventy-three cities and gathered 2.1 million visitors. It focused on Anne Frank and did not include a section on Sugihara. The second, who did, was launched in 2015 and by 2023 had toured twenty-two Japanese cities with some 220,000 visitors. The reason the second exhibition had less visitors was not that Japanese were less interested in Sugihara. It was that exhibitions in several cities were planned for 2020 and 2021 and had to be cancelled due to COVID.

The exhibition was positively reviewed by mainline Japanese media (see e.g., *Japan Today* 2015). During the COVID pandemic the second exhibition went virtual, and the success of the dedicated website brought the number of offline and online visitors to figures presumably comparable to those of the first version.

In the Peace Proposal for 2016, Ikeda did not compare Sugihara with Anne Frank. He compared the diplomat to "the women who risked their lives to support the Frank family while they were in hiding," part of "a network for the protection of Jewish refugees." This comparison helped Ikeda to make his point, which was about an "empathy, which exists independent of any codified norms of human rights [and] is the light of humanity that can shine brightly in any place or situation." As a Buddhist, Ikeda found the root of this empathy in Buddha's teaching that we should always be able to "put ourselves in the place of another":

> Buddhism takes as its starting point the universal human impulse to avoid suffering or harm and the undeniable sense of the unique value of our own being. It then leads us to the realization that others must feel the same. To the degree that we can put ourselves in the place of another, we gain a tangible sense of the reality of their suffering. Shakyamuni called upon us to view the world through such empathetic eyes and thus commit ourselves to a way of life that will protect all people from violence and discrimination (Ikeda 2016).

While we can also find in Kowner's article useful information about how Sugihara's fame grew gradually, and it is true that governments use historical celebrations for their own purposes, about the role of Soka Gakkai he totally misses the point. One wonders whether he knows what Soka Gakkai was and is all about. Any idea that Sugihara was promoted and globalized by Soka Gakkai or Ikeda to divert the attention from the evil of Japanese militarism is ludicrous, particularly because Soka Gakkai itself was a victim of that militarism.

It is clear that Ikeda loved the exemplary story of Sugihara, as do all those who know it, with the exception of a few misguided ideological or political critics. Soka Gakkai did contribute to make Sugihara better known in Japan and among the movement's members internationally. It did so not because Sugihara embodied some imaginary stereotype of Japan-ness but because he was a good and brave man whose example is valid for all countries and times. As Ikeda noted,

> Mr. Sugihara refused to obey those in authority in Japan because he felt that by failing to help those who came to him, he would be betraying his faith and most cherished beliefs. He had the courage to act in accord with his conscience, with what he believed was right,

> no matter how severely he was pressured. That kind of courage comes from deep conviction, from the philosophy or religious beliefs one holds dear (Ikeda 2010, 87).

It would be in the humanity's interest to find more women and men with the courage of Sugihara, capable of loving their countries and at the same time affirming that their leaders may make terrible mistakes, in both the Ukrainian and the Palestinian wars.

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