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Author: KEVIN M. WILLIAMS
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Page: 1

When Japanese diplomat Chiune Sugihara decided to issue travel visas to at least 6,000 Polish Jews during World War II, he knew he would be defying his government - but obeying his conscience.

Among the beneficiaries of this unassuming ambassador's benevolence was Chicago business legend Leo Melamed, whose family is among the "Sugihara survivors." Melamed, chairman emeritus of the Chicago Mercantile Exchange, was 8 years old at the time. "We were running from the Nazis when my father applied for the visa to Sugihara that would allow us to leave Russia and enter Japan," Melamed said. "It wasn't until I was an adult and fully understood the horrors of the Holocaust that I realized how extremely fortunate I was to have escaped from it, and what kind of outstanding humanitarian gesture it was to issue those visas, without which we would never have been able to escape."

Stories like this one, heard thirdhand, grabbed the attention of former museum curator Eric Saul. After he met the diplomat's wife, Yukiko, and son Hiroki, he became captivated by their tale. The family's pictures, in effect the Sugihara photo album, became a traveling exhibit titled "Visas for Life: The Story of Chiune and Yukiko Sugihara and the Rescue of Thousands of Jews."

Some people might think of Sugihara as the Japanese Schindler, the subject of the acclaimed film "Schindler's List," but Saul sees it differently.

"Sugihara didn't require any sort of moral awakening, like (Oskar) Schindler," Saul said. "He was morally good from the start. We like to think of Schindler as the German Sugihara."

Opening today at the Spertus Museum, "Visas" is a photographic exhibition containing more than 100 pictures that intertwine hope and horror. Not only is the life of Sugihara presented, but there are also images of people unable to escape the Nazis, despite the efforts of men like him.

The life and accomplishments of this man, depicted in stark, black and white images, had quite an impact on future generations. Another "Sugihara survivor" is Rochelle Zell, mother of businessman Sam Zell. Her family was saved from the Nazis, and today Rochelle Zell is part of the Bernard and Rochelle Zell Center of Holocaust Studies at Chicago's Spertus Institute.

Now 87, Rochelle Zell traveled to Kovno, Lithuania, with her family when they heard Sugihara was dispensing visas. Her husband, Bernard, went to the consulate and was granted one.

"He saved so many people," she said. "If you believe in God, he was a godsend."

For 28 days in 1940, from July 31 through Aug. 28, Sugihara issued several thousand visas, each of which was good for an entire family. It is estimated that the diplomat's efforts saved 6,000 to 12,000 Jews from the Dachau, Auschwitz and Stutthof concentration camps.

Saul says "Visas" became a labor of love for him almost immediately. He became captivated with the quiet dignity of Sugihara's wife and son, as they strove to get recognition for the courageous man who risked his life to save a troubled people. (Chiune Sugihara died in 1986.)

Upon seeing their collection of family photographs, Saul came up with the idea of curating an exhibition that would travel the United States. It became so popular, there are now three versions of it, which have been seen by more than 100,000 people.

The photos included in "Visas" are mostly from the Sugihara family's collection, which was almost lost. When the family was interred by the Russians near the end of the war, the pictures were confiscated by the camp commander, according to Saul. Sugihara had to bribe and cajole these officials for the release of his visual legacy.

Saul's exhibit also attempts to show Sugihara's personal evolution.

"His father wanted him to be a doctor, but he wanted to be a linguist," Saul said. "He put himself through school, and after becoming a diplomat was originally assigned to

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Manchuria, where he used his own money to help Chinese flood refugees. In 1934, he resigned from his Manchuria posting because of Japan's oppressive policy toward the Chinese."

Saul financed the original exhibit, contributing more than \$40,000 from his own pocket. When asked why he did it, he simply responds, "You have to recognize goodness."

Coming from a culture that emphasized discipline, Sugihara knew that terrible things might come from his decision to help the Jews. So he decided to put the matter to a family vote. He asked his wife, Yukiko, as well as his son Hiroki, who now lives in San Francisco.

"As a 5-year-old, the only thing I could understand was that if he didn't help these people, they could get killed," said the younger Sugihara. "I asked if the children would be killed, and father said yes. So I said that he had to help them." occupation, but Saul says Sugihara was signing about 300 each day.

Initially he petitioned the Japanese government for permission to do this, since his official position was little more than that of a spy, collecting information on Russian and German intentions. His request was denied three times, and Sugihara finally took it upon himself to sign the visas, despite his government's refusals.

Sugihara's wife fed him, massaged his hands and offered encouragement as he signed thousands of transit visas. On his final day in Lithuania, as his train departed the station, Sugihara signed and stamped blank pieces of paper to be filled in later by the recipients, and tossed them from his train window. Many of these were copied and used later by families.

"He used to always say to me, you have to stand on the side of people who need help," said his son Hiroki. "As a matter of fact, I've met quite a few of the survivors. You can't express with words what you feel when you meet these people. I feel that they're part of my family."

When the family left Lithuania, they traveled through Russia to Japan in 1947, tracing the route used by the refugees. Upon his return he was forced to resign by the Japanese government, which cited "that incident in Lithuania" as the unofficial reason. He supported his family with odd jobs, such as selling light bulbs door to door, until 1950, when Sugihara found work as a businessman in Moscow.

His youngest son and sister also died after the war, but the Sugiharas took all of these events in stride. "The family never spoke of these things," Hiroki said. "You feel that if you help people, sometimes you will have to sacrifice things in your own family."

Sugihara didn't know the outcome of his sacrifices until 1968, when Johoshua Nishri, an Israeli diplomat, tracked him down to thank him for saving his life. Subsequently, Sugihara was honored by the Israeli government, and his wife self-published a book, *Visas for 6,000 Lives*. (Its U.S. title is *Visas for Life*, which will be available at Spertus for \$26.) Shortly thereafter, Hiroki and Yukiko began their efforts to gain recognition for Chiune Sugihara.

"I felt personally that this had to be told," Hiroki said. "Not because we have to be recognized, but . . . so that people will remember what they can do, and that one person can make a difference."

The portraits of that person who made a difference, as assembled by Saul, are moving and eloquent in their simplicity.

One enduring image is that of Sugihara sitting behind his desk. The diplomat's tie is pulled down, his pen held in his right hand. His face bears a calm, benevolent gaze that, even through the 50-year-old negative, touches the heart with its unreserved goodness.

The resolve of his wife is evident in her defiant look as she and Sugihara are photographed in front of a "Jews not allowed" sign on a park gate.

"His wife, Yukiko," said Melamed, "wrote in her book of the embassy courtyard filled with refugees pleading for visas. She said they didn't understand the words, but the anguish on their faces was what moved them to do it."

To this day, Mrs. Sugihara has not been recognized for her efforts on behalf of the refugees. The Visas for Life Foundation is working to change that, in addition to disseminating information about other diplomats who worked to save thousands of lives during World War II.

"We don't think this is just a Jewish story," Saul said. "It's one that transcends culture, time and place. The world just needs heroes."