

The miracle of Hanukah of 1939: Bearing Witness

By Holocaust survivor, Solly Ganor

On Hanukah 1939 an event took place that initiated the rescue of thousands of Jews in Lithuania. Among those rescued were the rabbis and students of the Mirer Yeshiva, whose descendents are now the rabbis and students of the Mirer Yisheva, in Jerusalem and New York. The most unlikely rescuer was a Japanese diplomat in Kaunas Lithuania by the name of Chiune Sugihara, who was the only one among the foreign diplomats in Lithuania who issued visas to save Jews. He risked his career and the welfare of his family to do that and when years later he was asked why he did it he replied:

“My choice was either to obey my government or obey my God, and I chose to obey my God.”

In 1985 Yad Vashem awarded him the righteous among the Nations award. A small forest near Jerusalem was planted to honor Chiune Sugihara. He passed away the same year.

In 1999 Mrs. Yokiko Sugihara, the wife of the Japanese diplomat was invited by the rabbis of the Mirer Yeshiva in Jerusalem to honor her for saving them. A most touching scene took place in the Yeshiva which was recorded for the PBS and shown nation wide in the States and later also in Israel.

April 2004

Film, *Sugihara: Conspiracy of Kindness*, to be released nationally on the public broadcasting system of WBGH Boston. It will be shown on more than 300 stations.

There was a debate of how many Jews Sugihara rescued but that is of no importance because today there are more than forty thousands children and grand children of those Sugihara rescued.

In November 1995 an event took place at the Town Hall in New York to honor Mrs. Yokiko Sugihara, the wife of the Japanese diplomat.

That evening a rain storm hit New York, but the town hall was packed with people. They were all Sugihara's survivors and their descendents.

There were many emotional speeches that evening, including the one by Yukiko Sugihara herself, but the one that really touched us all was the short speech of a thirteen-year-old boy.

He came to the stage with a bunch of flowers in his hand, kissed Mrs. Sugihara on both cheeks and said: “Mrs. Sugihara, Your husband saved my grandfather and grandmother, and because of that I am here today and so are forty thousand descendants of the people to whom your husband issued visas. Thank you, Mrs. Yukiko Sugihara for granting us

all our lives.” The fifteen hundred people who attended the event stood up and gave the boy a standing ovation.

It was on Hanukah 1939 that I met Chiune Sugihara the Japanese consul in my home town of Kaunas, Lithuania.

In My book ' **Light One Candle**' I fully describe the events of that fateful Hanukah day. I actually named my book in honor of that Hanukah evening when we lit together the first Hanukah candle.

In her book 'Visas For Life', Mrs. Sugihara wrote on page 162, quote:

“ Chiune’s decision to issue visas may have been influenced by a young boy named Solly Ganor.” Unquote. It was very kind of her to write that, but I rather doubt that I had any influence on Mr. Sugihara’s decision to issue visas. He simply was an extraordinary man who couldn’t refuse people who came to him in their hour of need.

For the readers on the internet I am giving a shortened version of how I met Mr. Sugihara on that fateful Hanukah day in 1939.

Chiune Sugihara, Righteous Among the Nations

By Solly Ganor

I was eleven years old when I met Chiune Sugihara the Japanese consul in Kaunas. It was December 1939 and we celebrated Hanukah, the festival of lights. It was a particularly favorite festival with us children, because all the family members would give us Hanukah money. Some times we would even get money from friends of the family. But this year I had to give up all the money I collected to the Jewish refugee fund. No one really asked me to do it, but when the ladies of the committee for the refugees came to our house, on a sudden impulse, I gave them the ten Lit I had collected. Ten Lit was a lot of money, even for grown ups and I immediately regretted it, because I had lots of plans for the money, but what was done was done. The ladies were very moved with my gesture and assured me that the money would go to buy visas for the refugees who wanted to leave Lithuania.

That week Laurel and Hardy were being shown in the Metropolitan movie house. I was dying to see the new movie, but I had no money left, I gave it all to the refugees. Mother felt sorry for me and would have “lent” me the money, but father put his foot down.

“ You must stick to certain principals. It was a noble gesture to give your money for the refugees, but then don’t come whining to us for reimbursement. “ Father told me with that finality in his voice which I knew only too well. What made me even more furious, was the fact that he was right

My last hope was aunt Anushka. She would have mercy on me. She knew how crazy I was about Laurel and Hardy. I had made a date with my friends Vova and Izia,

the Glass twins, who were known as the Glazukes. We were to meet at the cash register for the afternoon's performance.

Before I left my mother made sure that I was dressed warmly and had my hat and gloves on. "Make sure you come back home before dark." She warned me.

The snow felt crisp under my boots and it shimmered white in the afternoon sun. It was cold, but that didn't bother me. I was on my way to the movies and I didn't care how cold it got.

There was a war out there somewhere far away and the Nazis captured Poland, but if it weren't for the Jewish refugees who came flooding into Lithuania, we wouldn't have noticed it.

On the way to aunt Anushka's shop, I saw menorahs with candles in the windows of Jewish homes, and here and there decorated Christmas trees in the homes of the Christians.

From some distance I could see my aunt's shop window brightly lit with colored bulbs. She had a large Christian clientele who were among the richest families in Kaunas because she stocked luxurious food items from all over the world. If you wanted Beluga caviar, French champagne or some fancy Swiss chocolates, you could get it in her shop. She also catered to foreign embassies that required specific food items, which were available only in her shop.

There was a contraption attached to her door that would play a merry tune when you opened it. It was a gift from some inventor friend of hers.

When I walked in she was serving some elegantly dressed man with strange slanted eyes. Anushka was talking to him in Russian.

"Ah, my dear nephew came for his Hanukah money, I bet." She said smiling at me. She either didn't remember that she had already given me once, or she wanted to save me the humiliation of asking for a second donation. She may have heard of my generosity with the committee ladies, and that too could have been the reason. Whatever it was, I wasn't going to give her any argument.

"Come here and meet his Excellency the consul of Japan, Mr. Sugihara." She said when she saw me staring at the man. I walked up slowly and extended my hand.

"How do you do, Sir." I said politely.

He solemnly shook my hand and then smiled. There was humor and kindness in those strange eyes. I took an immediate liking to this man.

It reminded me of what my grand father once told me:

"Remember, the eyes are the windows to a person's soul. If you look close enough you may see what is behind them."

I took this saying as many other inscrutable sayings of grandfather.

But when I looked at this man I suddenly understood what he meant. There was something in those eyes that made me feel the man behind them. I sensed an aura of goodness and kindness about him, I couldn't explain. Aunt Anushka, who noticed my strange behavior, laughed. "You want to go to the movies and you need a Lit. Right?"

I nodded quickly, still looking at Mr. Sugihara. While Anushka went to the cash registry, he took out from his pocket a shiny Lit and extended it to me.

"Since this is Hanukah, consider me your uncle." He said and gave me the coin. I hesitated for a moment, then took from him the coin and said something totally unexpected: "Since you are my uncle then you should come Saturday to our Hanukah party. The whole family will be there." I was astonished at my own audacity and had no idea what compelled me to say such a thing. Anushka who came back with the money and overheard our conversation, looked at me with disbelief.

"Come to think of it, I have never been to a Hanukah party. I would gladly come. But don't you think that you should ask your parents first?" He said with a smile. Anushka looked at us. "I am sure that his Excellency must be busy." She said with some embarrassment, but then she hastily added: "But if you are free and would like to come, you are cordially invited." She said with some confusion. "Then it's done. We shall meet on Saturday." He said shaking my hand. It was getting late and if I wanted to make it to the movie I had to run. Before I left I heard Anushka making arrangements to meet him on Saturday.

When I got back home from the movie aunt Anushka was there. They all looked at me strangely and aunt Anushka was grinning. I realized that she must have told them about my bizarre behavior with the Japanese consul and the fact that I invited him to the Hanukah party. I felt guilty, but I didn't know what to say to my parents. Seeing my distress, father held up his hand: "Wait. Before you say anything, let me tell you that you did the right thing. If you feel like inviting a stranger to the party, I think it is more than all right. You should never feel guilty about extending hospitality to strangers."

The same evening I had another surprise. Uncle Jochil brought with him a Jewish refugee with his eight year old daughter. They were from Poland and they came to stay with us for a while. He was a short middle-aged man with frightened eyes who constantly kept looking behind his shoulder. His name was Isaac Rosenblatt and his daughter was called Lea, a plump little girl with rosy cheeks and smiling blue eyes.

I had to give them my room and I moved in with my brother Herman, an arrangement I wasn't too crazy about. But mother explained to me that many Jewish families took in Polish refugees and we all had to make some sacrifices for the poor people who lost their homes and livelihood.

At first I resented them, but when Mr. Rosenblatt began telling us the terrible things that they had to endure during the Nazi attack on Warsaw I became much more sympathetic. It never occurred to me, though, that such a thing could ever happen to us. These things only happened to other people.

When Warsaw came under air attack, a bomb demolished the house they lived in and they were buried for three days under its rubble. It was a miracle that the room they slept in only partially collapsed and a large beam was holding up the crumbled ceiling. All the time they were without water or food and there was hardly any air to breath. When they almost reached their end a search party broke through to them and saved them. His wife and elder daughter, who happened to be in the kitchen at the time, were killed. It was a sad story. But that was just the beginning of their troubles. Later, when the Germans occupied Warsaw, they immediately began persecuting the Jews.

After the bombing he and Lea moved in with some relatives. A few days later two Germans came in and confiscated the house for the German army. When the Rosenblatt's cousin asked the Germans for a few days extension so they could find a place to move to, one of the Germans took out his handgun and shot the poor man to death right in front of his wife and children.

It was the first time that we heard from a live witness of what was going on Poland. At the time it sounded to us incredible and many thought that they were exaggerating their stories to get sympathy. Surely such things couldn't happen in the twentieth century! But that was not all. He told us the terrible hardships he and Lea had to get through before they finally managed to smuggle themselves into Lithuania. At supper he ate so quickly that he was finished with the food almost before we started eating.

After supper Mr. Rosenblatt told us bluntly, " You are crazy to stay here. You are sitting on a volcano, which is about to erupt, and you are all behaving as if you were living in America. I am getting out of here as soon as I get a visa, and I don't care if it is to the land of the cannibals in the jungles of Africa, as long as it is far enough from the Nazis. "

Saturday morning, mother started preparing for the Hanukah party and I helped her extend the large mahogany table. She was complaining about my rash behavior in inviting the Japanese consul and now she had to take out her best tablecloth and cutlery. But the strange Mr. Sugihara too intrigued her. Naturally, his wife was invited too and they were very curious what she was like. Mother and Anushka kept it a secret from the rest of the family, as they wanted to surprise them.

The candle lighting was set for six in the evening, but many of the family members arrived earlier as they had heard some rumors about a mysterious guest arriving that evening. Precisely at six, Anushka arrived with Mr. Sugihara and his wife Yokiko. She was dressed in a very elegant black dress and Mr. Sugihara wore a formal striped suit. They both looked very distinguished. Their appearance with aunt Anushka was a total surprise. Whomever they expected, they didn't expect this elegant Japanese couple. Aunt Anushka introduced them to the whole family as Mr. and Mrs. Chiune Sugihara. As most of the family members spoke both Russian and German, which Mr. Sugihara spoke as well, there were no communications problems.

The tables were laden with the best of food and drinks and mother even surprised the Japanese couple with some Japanese food that Anushka brought from her deli. To make our refugee, Mr. Rosenblatt, feel at home, we chose his daughter Lea to light the candles. Lea was very bashful in front of all the people and I helped her light the match and say the prayer. Then uncle Jacob took out his harmonica and we all sang the Hanukah songs and other Hebrew songs we learned at school.

While Lea and I lit the candles Mr. Sugihara stood near me and looked curiously at the ceremony. Later he told me that in Japan they had a similar ceremony of lighting candles. He wanted to know more details about the historical background of the Maccabees. He asked me many questions about my hobbies and when I told him that one of my hobbies was collecting stamps, he invited me to come and visit them, as he could give me some Japanese stamps. The Sugiharas enjoyed the evening very much, especially the Hanukah songs we sang. He told my mother and aunt Anushka that he was very impressed with the family spirit and unity he sensed in the room, which again reminded him very much of Japan. "One can sense the love and affection you all have for each other. I would like to meet more people of the Jewish community here." He said to mother.

While they were talking Mr. Rosenblatt came up to mother and asked her if she would introduce him to the Japanese consul. He looked somewhat out of place with the entire elegantly dressed crowd. Father had given him one of his suits, but it was too big on him and he looked awkward in it. After every one ate and the Hanukah songs were sung, father rang a servant's bell and asked for the family's attention. "I want you to meet Mr. Rosenblatt and his daughter Lea, who recently escaped from Poland. He wants to say a few words." Father announced.

Every one's eyes turned to Mr. Rosenblatt who looked uncomfortable in front of all the people. Mr. Rosenblatt spoke in German, either for the benefit of the Sugiharas, or because he spoke a Yiddish dialect which was hard to understand. In the beginning he spoke hesitantly, then he warmed up to the subject and described to the hushed audience the terrible things the Nazis did to the Jews in Poland, and to him and his family personally. Then he became so emotional that he broke down and cried. All the time I noticed that Mr. Sugihara listened very attentively to Jacob Rosenblatt. I noticed that he was visibly upset by Rosenblatt's accounts.

When I later introduced Mr. Rosenblatt to him he wanted to know many more details about the conditions of Poland under the Nazi occupation. I guess it was part of his job to get first hand information from the occupied Poland. Later I overheard Mr. Rosenblatt imploring the Japanese consul to issue him a visa. "Even a transit visa will help." He begged him. Mr. Sugihara looked doubtful. He explained that he was not allowed to issue any visas, not even transit visas. "Besides, what good would a transit visa be to you without a visa for your end destination. You must first have a visa to the country where you are going to settle." But then he invited him to come to the consulate and he would see how he could help him.

Six month later Chiune Sugihara issued thousands of visas to rescue the Jewish refugees in Lithuania. They all arrived in Japan and survived the war.

I don't know if I had any part in Sugihara's decision, as Mrs. Sugihara suggested in her book. I rather doubt it. I think that he simply was a good man who couldn't refuse people who needed his help so badly. What I do know is, that he was the only lighthouse in the sea of darkness that surrounded us in Europe at that time.

**Herzlia,
Israel.**

Hanukah , 16.12.2006