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The memory of Sugihara and the “visas for life” in Poland

Outline of content: The article examines the historical memory of the so-called “visas for life” issued in 1940 by the Japanese Consul in Kaunas, Sugihara Chiune, to Polish war refugees mainly of Jewish origin. He is memorialised in Japan, Lithuania and in the countries where the refugees ultimately settled, but not in Poland, where he remains almost unknown and has only few places dedicated to his memory. These often focus more on Sugihara’s cooperation with the Polish intelligence and their contribution to the visas action rather than the humanitarian and heroic deed of Sugihara, its message of tolerance and equality, or on the fate of the refugees.

Keywords: historical memory, sites of memory, Sugihara Chiune, “visas for life”, Tadeusz Romer, Polish war refugees, Polish Jews in WWII

Introduction

Today there exists a fairly widespread conviction that the past remembered in individual and collective memories, often referred to as historical awareness, is not only a component of contemporary social awareness, but also a very important factor in shaping local, regional, national, and state identities. In addition to that, historical awareness plays a vital role in the upbringing of the younger generation and in fostering their civic attitudes and pro-social behaviour. This close connection between historical awareness, termed by sociologists as the social memory of the past, and the present day is becoming ever more important in those societies which are currently going through a period of re-evaluating the image of their history. On an ever greater scale historians and sociologists are undertaking research into the various forms of historical memory of individuals, groups, and communities in order to understand the development of current issues in social life.

The memory of the events of World War II in contemporary Polish society has a great impact on the understanding of the concept of Polishness by the young generation of Poles, who not only do not know about the war from their own

experience, but also do not remember the period of the Polish People's Republic, when the wartime history of the nation was presented in an idiosyncratic way which today is often called "falsification of history". However, we may still meet witnesses who remember the war and can share their experiences in the form of personal memories. Hence the great interest – in Poland and around the world – in recording and handing down these "individual memories" in the form of interviews, autobiographies, memoirs, diaries, chronicles, letters, photographs, etc.

The problems of presenting history have been studied for many years by historians and sociologists, both in Poland and abroad, in the perspective of methodological considerations. The researchers have been examining the modes in which "individual memory" contributes to the shaping of "collective memory" (*mémoire collective*, as defined by Maurice Halbwachs), a memory representing the common experiences of an entire generation. What mechanisms are at work when this "collective memory" is transformed into "history", which is often called "the social memory of the past"? How should we deal with the multitude and variety of individual "small histories" (to use the term defined by Barbara Szacka) so that they can merge into a uniform image of the "great history"?

In the current journalistic debates and in the media the term "historical truth" is often used in the singular with the assumption that there is only one interpretation of history which conforms to the "truth" and that all other interpretations are various forms of falsification of this "truth". According to Jeffrey Olick, "historical truth is a cultural-social construct, dependent on the selective and interpretation-related activities of the subject", and "the media of collective memory represent not a single past, but a variety of pasts".¹ Thus, historians reject the notion of a single "historical truth" and instead are focused on the hierarchy and mechanisms of the co-existence of the "various pasts" in socio-political life and on their impact on the shaping of various types of identity, including national identity.

In the context of the Poland of today, it is particularly interesting to study the Jewish past and the memory of this past, including the role of monuments, museums, and events commemorating Polish Jews and the various actions taken to rescue them from the Holocaust. In the absence of monuments or museums, a very important role is played by media reports and cultural events, which function as "centres" or "sites of memory". Referring to the term *lieux de mémoire* (as defined by Pierre de Nora), I use it here, as proposed by Szpociński, also in its general sense, namely as "places of remembrance", "places of memories", or, the best of all, "places where memories are brought back", instead of "sites of memory".²

This article attempts to present the Polish "places of remembrance" of one particular action of rescuing Jews. Although it was carried out in Lithuania,

¹ Quoted after Kobielska M., "Pamięć zbiorowa w centrum nowoczesności. Ujęcie Jeffreya K. Olicka", *Teksty Drugie*, 6 (2010), p. 185.

² A. Szpociński, *Miejsca pamięci (lieux de mémoire)*, *Teksty Drugie*, 4 (2008), pp. 19–20.

it contributed to the rescue of *ca* 6,000 Polish citizens. The history of the so-called “visas for life” issued in Kaunas by the Japanese consul Sugihara in co-operation with Polish intelligence is little known in Poland. By contrast, his heroic deed is remembered in Japan, the country of his origin, the United States of America, Israel, Canada, and Australia, where most of the rescued eventually settled, and in particular in Lithuania, where the figure of the Japanese consul is very keenly remembered.

Sugihara Chiune and the “visas for life”

Sugihara Chiune³ was appointed vice-consul of Japan in Lithuania in 1939 after a very thorough preparation for diplomatic work, including a probationary period in Manchuria and the role of chargé d'affaires in Helsinki.⁴ From among the determining factors which led to sending him to the newly-established diplomatic institution in Lithuania, one should certainly point out his knowledge of the Russian language (in addition to German and English), his participation in the negotiations with the USSR concerning the Manchurian Railway and his short-lived marriage to an émigrée from Russia. It is beyond all doubt that the main goal in appointing Sugihara for this consular post was not only his diplomatic, but also his intelligence activity.⁵ Mistrustful of its German ally, the Japanese government decided to monitor the movement of both Soviet and German troops on the assumption that the Ribbentrop-Molotov agreement would not last long and that the Third Reich would invade the USSR.⁶ The strategic position of Lithuania after the German invasion of Poland and the (however limited) neutrality of the country led to a situation in which Kaunas became home to a significant number of consulates of various countries pursuing their intelligence goals.

The consulate of Japan in Kaunas played an important role for Poland owing to the co-operation of Sugihara with Polish intelligence and the action of issuing transit visas to Japan to Polish war refugees. Right from the outset of the

³ I use here the Japanese custom of placing the surname before the first name. In doing so, I follow Ewa Pałasz-Rutkowska, the Polish researcher who has provided the most extensive studies of Sugihara and the “visas for life” available in Polish.

⁴ Biographical information about Sugihara is discussed in the Polish literature in: E. Pałasz-Rutkowska, A.T. Romer, *Historia stosunków polsko-japońskich 1904–1945*, 2nd edition: Warszawa, 2009, pp. 242–243; O. Barbasiewicz, “Konsul Sugihara Chiune a polscy Żydzi w Kownie w okresie 1939–1940”, *Sprawy Narodowościowe*, 36 (2010), pp. 170–173; J. Guzik *Stosunek Japonii do kwestii żydowskiej w 1932–1945*, Kraków, 2013, pp. 100–109. A more detailed account of Sugihara can be found in *Kim pan jest, panie Sugihara?*, Warszawa, 2000. Unfortunately, the biography of Sugihara written by his wife Yukiko (*Visas for Life*, San Francisco 1995) has not been translated into Polish.

⁵ Pałasz-Rutkowska, Romer, *Historia stosunków polsko-japońskich...* 2009, p. 267.

⁶ *Ibid.*

mission in Kaunas, the consulate co-operated with officers of the Polish intelligence⁷ and this co-operation was part of a larger scheme of Polish-Japanese intelligence collaboration.⁸ The extent of this co-operation and mutual trust can be illustrated by the fact that Sugihara issued Japanese service passports to two Polish officers, Lt. Daszkiewicz and Capt. Jakubianiec who, after the closure of the consulate in Kaunas, moved with him to the Japanese diplomatic missions in Berlin, Prague, and Königsberg.⁹ There is only little detailed data available related

⁷ Pałasz-Rutkowska, Romer, *Historia stosunków polsko-japońskich...* 2009, p. 267.

⁸ Y. Onodera, "Walka attaché Onodery", *Japonica. Czasopismo poświęcone cywilizacji japońskiej*, 2 (1994), pp. 95–112; E. Pałasz-Rutkowska, "Onodera i Rybikowski", *Japonica. Czasopismo poświęcone cywilizacji japońskiej*, 2 (1994), pp. 93–95; Kuromiya, Peplowski, *Między Warszawą a Tokio*; A. Peplowski, *Wojna o tajemnice. W tajnej służbie Drugiej Rzeczypospolitej 1918–1944*, Kraków, 2011.

⁹ In his report, as well as in most cases in the secondary literature, he appears under the name Leszek. According to the materials of the Head Office of State Archives (2005), his name was Tadeusz or Stanisław; he also had a number of nicknames, including "Jan Stanisław Perz". "From late September 1939 [he served] in Polish intelligence in Lithuania and in the Vilnius area. Relying on the pre-war networks, he was primarily detecting the penetrations by agents of Soviet intelligence [...]. Thanks to the contacts of Capt. A. Jakubianiec he worked in the Polish Affairs Department of the Legation of Great Britain in Kaunas; he established an intelligence network subjected to the intelligence branch 'Płn.' ['North'] in Stockholm, also using pre-war intelligence contacts in the area (their attention was focused primarily on the movements of German and Soviet troops in the vicinity of the Lithuanian borders and military transport through Lithuania); later, in III/IV–VIII 1940, he worked undercover as a secretary to the Japanese consul Chiune Sugihara, who also worked for the intelligence in Kaunas; in August 1940 Daszkiewicz obtained a Japanese passport; in 1940 as the result of the cooperation of Daszkiewicz with Sugihara in Kaunas about 8,000 people were saved from the Germans, particularly Polish citizens of Polish nationality and of Jewish descent (the Poles forged ca 2,900 visas, thanks to which the refugees could leave Lithuania)". (*Polsko-Brytyjska współpraca wywiadowcza podczas II wojny światowej / Intelligence co-operation between Poland and Great Britain during World War II*, vol. 2, Naczelna Dyrekcja Archiwów Państwowych 2005, pp. 174–175).

The subsequent actions of Daszkiewicz were also very important for the cooperation of Polish intelligence with Sugihara, but had nothing to do with the action of issuing visas for the Polish war refugees. It is worth noting, however, that Daszkiewicz lived to see the end of the war and that in 1948 he submitted to the Polish government in London a detailed 88-page-long report on his intelligence activities. L. Daszkiewicz, *Placówka Wywiadowcza "G". Sprawozdania i dokumenta*, London 1948, typescript, copy held by the author; also available in the Romer Archive at the National Library in Warsaw.

"Alfons (Jerzy) Jakubianiec (1905–1945) [...] from 1 September 1939 [served as] an intelligence officer in Kaunas Lithuania, entered into contact with the Japanese attaché in Kaunas; in April 1940 received a Japanese passport from Consul Ch. Sugihara; after 1940 he was in Stockholm. Afterwards he became head of the intelligence mission in Berlin (employed at the embassy of Manchukuo), where he developed very fruitful activities in Germany and the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia in close cooperation with Mjr Dipl. M. Rybikowski ('Mickiewicz') residing in Stockholm, and the Japanese consul Sugihara [...]", (*Polsko-brytyjska współpraca*, p. 153). Jakubianiec was arrested by the Germans in 1941 and died in Sachsenhausen in 1945. Daszkiewicz described the efforts of Consul Sugihara to rescue Capt. Jakubianiec from the hands of the Gestapo, which sadly proved ineffective (Daszkiewicz, *Placówka Wywiadowcza "G"*, pp. 67–70).

to this collaboration which can be verified in reliable historical sources (owing to their nature, those actions were top secret and did not leave many traces), whereas the information derived from surviving personal accounts is at times contradictory with regard to the facts.¹⁰ This article is not aimed at discussing the details of this collaboration, as it would require additional in-depth research and a separate study.¹¹

The accounts of the witnesses disagree as to the circumstances in which Sugihara and Polish war refugees in Lithuania came into contact, especially as most of them stayed in Vilnius, not in Kaunas. It is an established fact that among tens of thousands of Polish refugees who found shelter in Vilnius after September 1939 there were about 15,000 people of Jewish origin. Most of them, anticipating further military actions by Germany, tried to escape abroad and sought support in all consulates present in Lithuania at the time, until these were closed down in August 1940 after the ultimate annexation of Lithuania to the USSR.¹² Unfortunately for the refugees it was no longer possible to obtain visas to many countries, including the USA and Australia, because of the quotas adopted by their governments in order to limit Jewish immigration. The idea of seeking help from the consul of Japan came most probably from the honorary consul of the Netherlands in Lithuania, Jan Zwartendijk, who following the instructions of his ambassador in Riga, de Decker, began the action of stamping the passports of the refugees with notices confirming that no visa was required to emigrate to Curaçao, which was then a Dutch colony.¹³ Having obtained such certificates, the refugees who held Polish passports could apply for transit visas from the consulate of Japan, which would make it possible for them to pass through the USSR and Japan to Central America. The action of Zwartendijk left very few traces, because before his return to the Netherlands, which was already under German occupation, he burned all the documents testifying to his involvement in helping Jewish refugees in order to protect himself and his family.¹⁴ We do not know for certain who initiated the action of issuing

¹⁰ Daszkiewicz, *Placówka Wywiadowcza "G"*; R. Mackiewicz, S. Steckiewicz, *Z dziejów wywiadu na Litwie w czasie II wojny światowej*, 1996 <http://www.akwilno.pl/pdf/Z-dziejow-wywiadu.pdf> (access 12.09.2013); Onodera, *Walka attaché Onodery; Y. Sugihara, Visas for Life*, San Francisco 1995.

¹¹ One may find the most accurate study of this topic in a number of publications by A. Peplowski, although the author was not particularly focused on the action of issuing visas to Polish refugees in Lithuania.

¹² P. Łosowski, "Sprawa neutralności Litwy wobec wojny polsko-niemieckiej 1939 r.", *Studia z Dziejów ZSRR i Europy Środkowej*, 15 (1979), pp. 115–140; id., "Kształtowanie się polityki litewskiej wobec obszarów przyłączonych jesienią 1939 r.", *Studia z Dziejów ZSRR i Europy Środkowej*, 17 (1981), pp. 139–166.

¹³ Those refugees who had no valid Polish passport could apply for a certificate of citizenship (*laissez-passer*) in the British legation in Kaunas representing the Polish government in exile.

¹⁴ M. Paldiel, *Saving the Jews: Amazing Stories of Men and Women who Defied the "Final Solution"*, Rockville, 2000.

visas: Sugihara, motivated by the circumstances reported to him by Polish Jews, the two Dutchmen, Zwartendijk or de Decker, Zorah Wahrhaftig, a Jewish refugee from Poland engaged in helping other refugees, or officers of Polish intelligence.

We can, however, accept as reliable the information quoted in research literature, which states that in the course of only several weeks in July and August 1940 Zwartendijk confirmed in about 1,200–1,400 or even 2,400 passports permission to travel to Curaçao, while Sugihara issued over 2,000 transit visas to Japan.¹⁵ There are also reports indicating that Polish intelligence, or the refugees themselves, forged the stamps and visas, which means that it is impossible to determine the total number of visas which made it possible for the refugees to cross the Japanese border. It often happened that one visa allowed a whole family to make the journey, so it is estimated that the visas issued by Sugihara saved about 2,500–6,000 people,¹⁶ most of whom were Jewish (although the accounts of the witnesses differ greatly also in this respect); 90% of them were Polish citizens.¹⁷ The latter figure is confirmed, for in the case of the “first” 2,139 visas the recorded personal data included also the citizenship of all recipients.

Sugihara made several appeals to his government for permission to issue these visas, but all of his requests were rejected. Nevertheless, contravening the orders of his superiors, he continued the visa action until his departure from Kaunas. It is very likely that he also knew about the “forged” visas which were issued after he had left the city. It was for this reason that some refugees were subjected to long interrogations on the Soviet-Japanese border – some details in their documents were at times inconsistent and the border guards were taken aback by so great a number of refugees holding the same transit visas issued by the consulate in Kaunas. Some of them were even sent back to Vladivostok, which called for intervention from Poland’s ambassador to Japan, Tadeusz Romer, who was actively and very effectively involved in the reception of Polish refugees in Japan.¹⁸ Despite complications and difficulties, all the holders of Japanese transit visas were let into Japan thanks to this aid. Some refugees managed to pass through China to Harbin in Manchuria, at the time occupied by the Japanese, which was home to a sizeable Polish community.¹⁹

¹⁵ Pałasz-Rutkowska, Romer, *Historia stosunków polsko-japońskich...* 2009, p. 267. The so-called “Sugihara’s List” included 2,139 names.

¹⁶ According to Ewa Pałasz-Rutkowska and Andrzej Romer, “current estimates based on various sets of data and memories of a number of survivors rescued owing to the help of the Japanese consul in Kaunas say that there must have been about 5,000–6,000 rescues”, Pałasz-Rutkowska, Romer, *Historia stosunków polsko-japońskich...* 2009, p. 260.

¹⁷ 5% of them were of Lithuanian citizenship; 2% German; 1% Czech; 1% other countries, quoted after: *Holocaust Survivors and Victims Database*, http://www.ushmm.org/online/hsv/source_view.php?SourceId=29648 (access: 10.06.2014).

¹⁸ Pałasz-Rutkowska, Romer, *Historia stosunków polsko-japońskich...* 2009, p. 267.

¹⁹ A. Jakubowicz, A. Hądzelek, “The Polish Jews of Shanghai and the Political Sociology of Historical Memory”, *Holocaust Studies: A Journal of Culture and History*, 19 (2013), no. 2, p. 42.

Ambassador Tadeusz Romer was the first port of call in Japan for the refugees who came from Vladivostok to the Japanese port of Tsuruga – he distributed humanitarian aid and organised temporary housing and basic living conditions. In doing this, he co-operated with international Jewish organisations and the Jewish community of the city of Kobe. In his capacity as an ambassador, he also issued Polish passports or extended their validity and negotiated with the diplomatic missions of other countries with the aim of agreeing on the terms of offering the right of permanent residence in those countries to the refugees. It is worth emphasising the activities of ambassador Romer with regard to the families of "military and civil personages facing the threat of the anticipated resumption of Soviet deportations" who were striving to make the journey from Vilnius to Japan.²⁰ Owing to the joint effort of ambassador Romer and international Jewish organisations, a significant number of these refugees received visas and were transferred to Palestine, the USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and South America. About a thousand refugees who remained in Japan until the autumn of 1941 were sent to Shanghai together with the evacuated Polish embassy. Most of them lived there to see the end of the war. It is estimated that today more than 40,000 people (the survivors and their descendants) owe their lives to Sugihara. Thus the visas issued by him are commonly known as "visas for life".²¹

It was only after some time that consul Sugihara Chiune had to face the consequences of his illegal action in issuing the visas. After all, he failed to obey the orders of his government and in doing so violated one of the fundamental principles of social and professional life in Japan which entails total submission to one's superiors. After the Japanese consulate in Kaunas had been closed, Sugihara continued his work in diplomacy (and intelligence) in the missions in Berlin, Prague, Königsberg, and Bucharest. After the capture of Bucharest by the Red Army he was arrested and sent together with his family to a prisoner of war camp, where he spent 18 months. Only after his return to the country was he forced to quit the Japanese diplomatic service and deprived of his retirement benefit. As a result of this forced resignation, he had trouble finding a job and making a living for his family. He worked in Moscow for many years, living there on his own, while his family lived in Japan.

He changed his name into Sugiwaru Sempo, which made it considerably more difficult for the Jews rescued by him to get in touch with him after the war. Many of them tried, but it was to no avail. It was only in 1968, thanks to a chance meeting, that Sugihara learned about the success of his action, while the Jewish refugees from Poland who had been saved by him and were by then scattered around the world finally had the opportunity to express their gratitude. They offered financial help

²⁰ Pałasz-Rutkowska, Romer, *Historia stosunków polsko-japońskich...* 2009, p. 267.

²¹ According to the Simon Wiesenthal Centre: <http://motlc.wiesenthal.com/site/pp.asp?c=hkLT-J8MUKvH&b=475915> (access: 20.09.2012).

to their benefactor, but Sugihara rejected the offer, accepting only the scholarship for one of his sons to study in Israel. In 1985, Yad Vashem honoured Sugihara with the title of “Righteous Among the Nations”. He was the first Japanese to receive this title, but at the time he was already in very poor health and for this reason the medal, brought to Japan by Shevach Weiss acting as a representative of Yad Vashem, was accepted on his behalf by his wife Yukiko. Sugihara died less than a year later, but the memory of him and the process of commemorating his actions had only just begun taking place.

The memory of Sugihara in Poland

In Poland, the memory of the action of Sugihara is cultivated in a number of various forms: scientific studies and publications included in more comprehensive works of research, short notices in the press and longer journalistic texts, documentary films (for the most part produced in other countries and screened at Polish festivals), a Japanese theatre play performed also in Poland, institutions dealing with intercultural topics, as well as prizes and distinctions awarded by the state. It seems, however, that knowledge about and the memory of Sugihara and his action of the “visas for life” is still insufficient in our country as opposed to the many forms and the scale of commemorating him in Lithuania, Japan, and the countries where the refugees ultimately settled.

Research works

The pioneering research work on Sugihara in Poland has been conducted by Professor Ewa Pałasz-Rutkowska from the University of Warsaw. A specialist in Japanese philology and Polish-Japanese relations in the twentieth century, she addressed this topic already in the early 1990s and did a very thorough research in the literature and other sources, also held in the Japanese archives. Her numerous publications (articles and monographs) resulting from this research provide analyses of Sugihara’s action in broader contexts, including political circumstances. Her personal contacts and conversations with Sugihara’s wife, Yukiko, and with the wife of General Onodera, Yuriko, have proved to be a very significant contribution.²² Pałasz-Rutkowska has also managed to access the previously unpub-

²² “Makato Onodera (1897–1987), Japanese brigadier general [...]; October 1940 (took office in January 1941) – 1945 military attaché in Sweden [...]; head of an intelligence network covering most of Europe [...]; in 1941–1944 he closely cooperated with M. Rybikowski, Polish intelligence officer, who used a Manchukuo passport in the name of ‘Peter Ivanov’, allegedly a Russian ‘White’ emigrant; [...] in Rybikowski’s view, the main merit of Onodera lay in the fact that he informed Tokyo that declaring war against the Soviets would have been a grave mistake [...]; German intelligence tried to capture Rybikowski; in April 1944 he was informed by General

lished reports of the Polish intelligence officers, Lt. Leszek Daszkiewicz and 2nd Lt. Leszek Hryncewicz. A substantial number of her works has been co-authored by Andrzej Romer, a cousin of Tadeusz Romer, the Polish ambassador in Tokyo at the time when the refugees holding the transit visas issued by Sugihara were arriving to Japan. The book titled *Historia stosunków polsko-japońskich 1904–1945* (1996) [*A History of Polish-Japanese relations 1904–1945*] was reissued in a second edition and has been the fundamental work of Polish scholarship for the study of this topic. The work by Pałasz-Rutkowska is characterised by a detailed elaboration of the sources, which for the most part are inaccessible, as well as by consideration of the visa action against the broader background of Polish-Japanese relations, particularly with regard to the matter of military intelligence co-operation. In the afterword to the first edition of that book, Professor Jolanta Tubielewicz emphasised "the astonishing objectivity of the authors and their ability to select the sources [...]. It is a piece of fine scholarship [...] which fortunately does not make the monograph appear unbearably stodgy. It is simply an enjoyable read". In addition to her scholarly publications, Pałasz-Rutkowska is also involved in journalistic-oriented research activities devoted to Sugihara, which will be discussed below.

Apart from Pałasz-Rutkowska, there are only few academics interested in the actions of Sugihara and his merit with regard to Poland. In this context, it is worth mentioning Olga Barbasiewicz from Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw and Joanna Guzik from the Jagiellonian University in Cracow. Both are Japanese philologists by education, but in their work they also deal with political sciences and international relations. The co-operation of Sugihara with Polish intelligence has been discussed for many years by Andrzej Pełtoński.

By contrast, Polish historians and researchers working on Jewish topics have not evinced much interest in this issue. "Kwartalnik Historii Żydów" ["The Jewish History Quarterly"] edited by the Jewish Historical Institute [in Warsaw] did publish one research work related to the issue in 2003 – written by the Japanese historian Hiroshi Bando. The action of Sugihara was also briefly discussed in monographs dealing with Jewish history,²³ as well as with Vilnius²⁴ and the Polish eastern borderlands.²⁵ Generally, however, Polish research and scientific publications focus largely on the co-operation of Sugihara with Polish intelligence and do

Onodera that the Germans were tracking him. As a result he was taken by the English to Great Britain, *Polsko-brytyjska współpraca*, p. 107.

²³ A. Żbikowski, *U genezy Jedwabnego: Żydzi na Kresach Północno-Wschodnich II Rzeczypospolitej, wrzesień 1939–lipiec 1941*, Warszawa, 2006, p. 71.

²⁴ L. Tomaszewski *Wileńszczyzna lat wojny i okupacji 1939–1945*, Warszawa, 1999, pp. 122–127; W.K. Roman, *Konspiracja polska na Litwie i Wileńszczyźnie: wrzesień 1939 – czerwiec 1941. Lista aresztowanych*, Toruń, 2001; J. Krajewski, *Wojenne dzieje Wilna 1939–1945*, Warszawa, 2011, pp. 35–36.

²⁵ S. Ciesielski, *Kresy Wschodnie II Rzeczypospolitej: przekształcenia struktury narodowościowej, 1931–1948*, Wrocław, 2006, p. 49.

not refer to his contribution to the rescue of Polish refugees, mainly of Jewish origin. It was only 2013 that saw the publication of the work of Joanna Guzik discussing the visa action of Sugihara in the broader context of Japanese-Jewish relations.²⁶ There is a lack of Polish studies devoted to the vicissitudes of the refugees rescued by the Japanese consul. No attempts have been made at considering this issue in the context of the history of Polish Jews.

Memoirs

From among the documents and other sources useful for further research on this topic one has to note in particular the archival material concerning intelligence issues studied by Pałasz-Rutkowska and Peplowski. Most notably, it includes reports and recollections of witnesses and participants in these events (including Sugihara²⁷) – most of these remain unpublished, although the most recent edition of Pałasz-Rutkowska and Romer's book²⁸ presents the reader with substantial excerpts from this material. The exhibition titled *Tadeusz Romer. Dyplomata i emigrant* [*Tadeusz Romer: a diplomat and an emigrant*] provided a fair amount of information from the time of his ambassadorial duty in Japan; it is worth noting the unique recordings of his daughter, Teresa Romer, who well remembered the actions of her parents in Tokyo and Shanghai. Also the film *Wizy życia* [*Visas for Life*] directed by Andrzej Miłosz (to be discussed below) includes a number of priceless recordings, since it was filmed in 1997, i.e. when there were still many living eyewitnesses and participants in those events.

There is a lack of memoirs of the refugees themselves, nor are there any interviews conducted with their descendants. In a plethora of books published in Poland and based on the memoirs of Polish Jews from the time of World War II, no records are included of those who found temporary refuge in Vilnius and, with their "visas for life" in hand, embarked on a risky journey into the unknown, crossing the vast stretches of the USSR to reach Japan. The many refugees who could not obtain visas in Japan to go on to other countries were transferred in October 1941 to Shanghai, where many of them survived the war in the very difficult conditions of the Shanghai ghetto. Much as these memoirs are fascinating, they have not secured a place in the historical awareness of the Poles.

²⁶ This topic has been addressed a number of times in other languages, as can be seen in publications (particularly in Japan and the USA). These, however, have not been thoroughly reviewed in the Polish secondary literature. J. Guzik referred to several important studies in the introduction to her work; *Stosunek Japonii do kwestii żydowskiej*, pp. 13–15.

²⁷ Written originally in Russian, they were translated into Polish and published in Poland by Ewa Pałasz-Rutkowska: "Raport konsula Sugihary Chiune", translated from Russian, edited and prefaced by E. Pałasz-Rutkowska, *Japonica. Czasopismo poświęcone cywilizacji japońskiej*, 7 (1997), pp. 129–139.

²⁸ *Historia stosunków polsko-japońskich...* 2009, pp. 235–302.

I have managed to identify two such records.²⁹ The book by Aleksander B. Skotnicki and Władysław Klimczak published in 2006, *Społeczność żydowska w Polsce* [*The Jewish Community in Poland*], includes the recollections of the Feldblums, a family rescued from the Holocaust by Sugihara and his “visas for life” which made it possible for them to leave Vilnius in 1940. “Having arrived in Moscow, the Feldblums decided that they would go not to Japan, but to Palestine (they obtained Palestinian visas in the meantime) and travelling through Odessa, Constantinople, Asia Minor, Syria, and Lebanon they reached Haifa, where they were reunited with the elder son Michał” (p. 157). The chapter on the Feldblums contains many photographs, including a photograph of Sugihara.

The other example is the television interview by Grzegorz Miecugow (in the series *Inny punkt widzenia* [*A Different Point of View*]) with Marcel Weyland, who visited Poland in 2013 to collect the “Gloria Artis” award from the Minister of Culture and National Heritage in recognition of his accomplishment in translating Polish literature into English (in particular *Pan Tadeusz* [*Pan Tadeusz or The Last Foray in Lithuania*]). The interview was broadcast on TVN24 in July 2013; the video recording is also available on the Internet. In this 39-minute-long conversation with Miecugow, Weyland recounted the story of the journey which took him and his loved ones from Łódź to Shanghai. His family, he said, was fairly well-to-do and owned a small car which they used in order to escape the Nazi invasion from Łódź to Warsaw. They fled from there to Lublin and later through Kovel to Vilnius, where they waited for the possibility of taking flight even farther from the Nazis. An opportunity to leave Vilnius presented itself when they received visas owing to the co-operation of Sugihara and the Dutch consul. These indispensable documents made it possible for them to go to Japan, from where they could continue their escape to some other country. They made the journey by train from Vilnius to Vladivostok, where they were thoroughly searched by the Soviet border guards. Weyland’s mother pointed out that it was her birthday on that particular day – it turned out that the stern controllers had some human feelings, for they gave back to her all her belongings confiscated on the border. While in Japan, Weyland was confronted with an entirely different world. He attended a Methodist school, where he learned mainly English. Seven months later they were sent to Shanghai, where he studied at a Jewish school offering tuition in the English language; he was also in charge of the school library. His sister hoped to get to Canada, where her fiancé had already settled, by passing through Australia. The war on the Pacific, however, forced her to stay on the Australian continent. It was following her invitation that Weyland’s family travelled to Australia via Hong-Kong after the war ended. Nineteen year old, Marcel Weyland worked there in various factories, particularly in the production of construction materials,

²⁹ Perhaps there are more such testimonies, but they are difficult to find, given that there is no central repository of this type of records.

which led him to study architecture. Only sometime later did he start studying law and become a specialist in building regulations. He got married to an Australian with whom he has five children, 21 grandchildren and several great-grandchildren. This story of one of the survivors rescued owing to the “visas for life” is not only a unique testimony to the experience of thousands of refugees who found themselves in similar conditions. It is also a record of priceless memories, impressions, and stories about the flight of the refugees, including an account of the conditions in which they lived and fostered their identity. Still today, Marcel Weyland speaks beautiful Polish. Such memories can also play a significant role in the study of histories which are poorly documented. For instance, the situation of Polish Jews in the Shanghai ghetto is one of the hitherto unknown and unstudied chapters in the history of the Poles during World War II. Ambassador Romer, before he had to leave Shanghai, helped the Polish refugees in establishing a number of organisations, which made it possible for them to be treated as Poles rather than stateless refugees.³⁰ These organisations largely contributed to their survival in those harsh conditions³¹ and gave them the opportunity to use the Polish language.³²

Publications: books and newspapers

The year 2000 saw the publication of the Polish translation of the biography of Sugihara written by Hillel Levine, a professor of Boston University, titled *Kim pan jest, panie Sugihara?* [literally: *Who Are You, Mr Sugihara?*] – as yet, it is the

³⁰ Pałasz-Rutkowska and Romer quote from Romer’s report in which he explained the following: “My efforts were focused mainly on establishing a homogeneous organisation of this emigration and thus distinguishing it from *circa* 15,000 Jews, German citizens, or stateless people, who having no recourse to help and financial means faced the threat of the misery of the Shanghai ghetto or even of being confined in Japanese concentration camps. [...] since the liquidation of the consular office in Shanghai in August 1942 [...] the supervision over Polish citizens was unofficially transferred to an *ad hoc* committee working under the auspices of the Board of the Association of Poles in China (and with the consent of the Japanese authorities in the occupied land) and composed of not only representatives of Polish residents, but also representatives of Jewish refugees, Polish citizens”, *Historia stosunków polsko-japońskich...* 2009, p. 273.

³¹ Drawing on Japanese and other documents, personal recollections and scientific studies, J. Guzik gathered a substantial amount of valuable information on the process of establishing the ghetto by the Japanese authorities as well as on the conditions of life in the Shanghai ghetto: “Malnutrition was a frequent cause of death in the ghetto – by the end of 1943, there were 3,000 recorded cases according to the Red Cross, while 6,000 Jews were on the verge of starvation. In addition to that, 9,000 Jews were constantly undernourished”, *Stosunek Japonii do kwestii żydowskiej*, p. 119. A. Jakubowicz and A. Hądzelek did a preliminary study on the situation of Jewish refugees of Polish citizenship in Shanghai on the basis of source materials and international publications; *The Polish Jews of Shanghai*, pp. 43–50.

³² Minutes from the meetings of the Mutual Aid Society of Polish War Refugees were written in Polish. Other publications, except for the local newspaper *Echo Szanghajskie*, appeared in Yiddish.

only book available in Polish devoted entirely to Sugihara and the “visas for life”. The first reactions of Polish communities in the USA appeared soon after the release of its original version in 1996. One of these was published in the discontinued Internet periodical *Spojrzenia* (1991–1998); it was the first Polish-language review of Levine’s book.³³ The author of the review, J. Krzystek, asserted that he “had known about this history for more than ten years, well before it appeared in American newspapers”. Krzystek demonstrated little understanding of the attitudes of the Japanese state and of Japanese society towards Jews; he seems to have been surprised by the assertion of Levine that “the Japanese did not subscribe to the anti-Semitic Nazi ideology”. He reproached Levine with ethnocentrism, but at the same time (in the section titled “Sugihara and the Poles”) he focused on the unfavourable portrayal of Polish soldiers in Levine’s book (an anecdote of marginal importance for the narrative) without mentioning the way in which the Polish war refugees rescued by Sugihara were described by the author. Would that mean that Krzystek did not consider them as Poles, since – as is well known – most of them were Jewish? Probably not, for in the conclusion of his review he voiced his criticism about the separation of Polish Jews from ethnic Poles: “in so many reputable history books accusations are levelled at the Polish authorities, both the government in exile and the underground state, that they gave preference to ethnic Poles in the critical situations of World War II. For example, two books by David Engel – *Facing Holocaust. The Polish Government in Exile and the Jews, 1943–1945* and *In the Shadow of Auschwitz*”³⁴ – can serve as a case in point. Krzystek is well acquainted with the literature on this subject, so it is surprising to note that his review of Levine’s book is so incomplete.

Spojrzenia published another commentary on the same topic,³⁵ namely a response to Krzystek’s review,³⁶ the author of which elaborated on one aspect of this history drawing primarily on the American publications by Mordechai Paldiel.³⁷ The fact that in 1997 alone there appeared two articles written by Poles who were

³³ J. Krzystek, “Konsul Sugihara”, *Spojrzenia*, 148 (1997), <ftp://ftp.icm.edu.pl/pub/journals/spojrzzenia/SPO.148.html> (access: 3.05.2016).

³⁴ Krzystek criticised Engel’s books despite the fact that even in the documents of the Polish underground state one can find such cases of prioritising ethnic Poles. For instance, in the history of the “visas for life” we may find relevant information in the report of Daszkiewicz: “Once the Japanese consulate began issuing visas, there was a massive response from the Jews, while the Poles for the most part were not interested. Only about a dozen came forward and I made it easier for them to be treated with priority with regard to all issues [underlined by A.H.] related to the departure” (*Placówka Wywiadowcza “G”*, p. 23). Daszkiewicz is making a clear distinction between the “Jews” and the “Poles” and considers it his duty to give priority to the “Poles”.

³⁵ T.K. Gierymski, “Sugihara i Żydzi”, *Spojrzenia*, 148 (1997), <ftp://ftp.icm.edu.pl/pub/journals/spojrzzenia/SPO.148.html> (access: 14.05.2016).

³⁶ Krzystek, *Konsul Sugihara*.

³⁷ M. Paldiel, *The Path of The Righteous: Gentile Rescuers of Jews During the Holocaust*, Jersey City, NJ, 1993; id., *Sheltering the Jews: stories of Holocaust rescuers*, Minneapolis, MN, 1996.

already very well informed about Sugihara's history illustrates the interest of Polish journalists in the topic.

Polish daily newspapers also took note of the actions of Sugihara, mainly in brief mentions on the occasion of various events. Thus, *Gazeta Wyborcza* mentioned the celebrations of Sugihara's birthday anniversary held in Japan in 2000.³⁸ In 2008, *Rzeczpospolita* reported on the appreciation of Consul Jan Zwartendijk by the Queen of the Netherlands.³⁹ The same newspaper returned to this topic in 2010 following the discovery of a collection of old photographs, first reported by the British *Daily Mail*.⁴⁰ The photographic album in question belonged to Tatsuo Osako, an employee of the Japan Tourist Bureau which helped the Jewish refugees remain in Japan thanks to the funding provided from the United States.⁴¹ The anonymous author of this article presented the history of the visa action organised by Sugihara in cooperation with the Dutch consul, Jan Zwartendijk. It is interesting to note that the British journalist made no reference to the fact that most of the Jews rescued by Sugihara were Polish citizens. Piotr Zychowicz, who addressed this topic in *Rzeczpospolita*, noted that the visas were issued "mainly to Polish citizens who had taken refuge in Lithuania".⁴² The article in the *Daily Mail* presented five photographs with annotations written by the refugees. One is in Polish (literally: "A souvenir to a very nice Japanese man. Rózia"), one in English, two in French, and another one most probably also in Polish (it is slightly damaged, but the annotation begins with "Na ...", so it is plausible that it read "Na pamiątkę", i.e. "a souvenir to..."). The author also noted that "the messages on the photos given to Osako are in languages that reflect the Nazi advance through Europe: German, Polish, Norwegian, French".⁴³ The article by Zychowicz in *Rzeczpospolita* included only one photograph (the one signed in Polish by a certain Rózia), but the author

³⁸ "Japoński Schindler. Sugihara uhonorowany", *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 289 (2000), http://www.archiwum.wyborcza.pl/Archiwum/1,0,1293449,20001212RP-DGW,Japonski_Schindler.html (access: 07.07.2013).

³⁹ M. Szymaniak, A. Rybińska, "Bohaterowie czasu Zagłady", *Rzeczpospolita*, 27.06.2008, <http://www.rp.pl/arttykul/154668.html> (access: 26.08.2011).

⁴⁰ "Is this Japan's Oscar Schindler?: Diaries reveal the tourist board worker who helped Jews escape the Nazis in World War Two", *DailyMail.co.uk* (18.10.2010), <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1321359/Amazing-photographs-hint-intriguing-sub-plot-World-War-Two--Jews-helped-escaped-Nazis-allies-Japan.html> (access: 26.08.2011).

⁴¹ "In 1940, the Japan Tourist Bureau, the country's main tourist agency, agreed to help Jews in the U.S. distribute aid money to refugees fleeing Europe. This would allow them to fulfil immigration requirements and help them function once inside Japan", *Daily Mail*, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1321359/Amazing-photographs-hint-intriguing-sub-plot-World-War-Two--Jews-helped-escaped-Nazis-allies-Japan.html> (access: 3.06.2016).

⁴² P. Zychowicz, "Jak Japończycy ratowali Żydów", *Rzeczpospolita*, 19.10.2010, <http://www.rp.pl/arttykul/551288-Jak-Japonczycy-ratowali-Zydow.html#ap-1> (access: 3.05.2016).

⁴³ "The messages on the photos given to Osako are in languages that reflect the Nazi advance through Europe: German, Polish, Norwegian, French", <https://www.newspapers.com/newspage/131125389/> (access: 3.06.2016).

also quoted the text written in French signed by “I. Segaloff”. The most interesting part of the latter article is an interview with Professor Andrzej Żbikowski from the Jewish Historical Institute [in Warsaw] who asked the question: who were the Jews actually taking flight from? He takes the view that in mid-1940 Jews were not as much afraid of the Germans, for in the face of the Soviet takeover of Lithuania “they did not fear Gestapo, but rather the NKVD”. As yet, this particular strand of the debate on Polish interpretations of the “visas for life” action has not been discussed, even if it was mentioned by Skaradziński in his review of Levine’s book: “the selfless Japanese man issued transit visas – through Japan – to Jews who for the most part were coming from Poland to Lithuania in their flight from the Germans and saw no future for themselves, contrary to the Polish stereotype, in the zone of influence of Communist Russia”.⁴⁴ In their book, Pałasz-Rutkowska and Romer included quotes from a report of Sugihara: “all of them were extremely frightened by the threat of the advancing German troops. They were growing in number each and every day. With tears in their eyes they were pleading for Japanese visas [...]”.⁴⁵ In the first edition of the book, Pałasz-Rutkowska and Romer quoted passages from the unpublished report of Ambassador Romer of 6 February 1941: “Over 95% of the refugees with confirmed or putative Polish citizenship who have come to Japan so far are Jewish, if not by faith then at least by descent. This phenomenon is explained not only by their greater resourcefulness, but also the organised support which they receive from their compatriots abroad. [...] The influx of the refugees of Polish nationality, which to date has been moderate, is explained by their generally more limited financial means and stronger ties with the local life and relationships than is the case with the Jews, as well as by their negative attitude, especially at first, towards the prospect of a risky and costly journey to the East into the unknown”.⁴⁶ Similar observations can be found in the chapter of Longin Tomaszewski’s book titled *Polish intelligence mission in Kaunas*: “it is indeed significant that the people leaving were almost exclusively Jewish, and that there were no more than several dozen Poles who registered to take the journey. It can be certainly explained by the greater resourcefulness of the Jews and most of all by the fact that they were urged by the terrible fear of the Germans and the imminent extermination; they could also count on organised support from the wealthy Jewish communities in other countries. By contrast, the Poles were not as strongly motivated to take such a hazardous journey, and very costly at that, not to mention the fact that they could not count at all on financial support from elsewhere”.⁴⁷ In this particular instance, it would be most interesting to refer to

⁴⁴ B. Skaradziński (“Z szarad historii”, *Nowe Książki*, 11 [2000]), however, refrained from definitive statements on this topic and added: “Perhaps some people anticipated that Lithuania [...] might easily fall into German hands”.

⁴⁵ *Historia stosunków polsko-japońskich...* 2009, p. 255.

⁴⁶ *Historia stosunków polsko-japońskich...* 1996, p. 192.

⁴⁷ Tomaszewski, *Wileńszczyzna lat wojny*, p. 126.

the personal recollections of the survivors, their memories of those events, and their motivations for their decision to leave and take a perilous expedition into the unknown. It is yet another proof that such recollections, apart from their great value, can greatly contribute to the understanding and scholarly study of this topic.

The weekly magazine *Wprost* also mentioned the history of the “visas for life”. In 2001 it included a short note about the celebrations of the hundredth anniversary of the birth of Sugihara taking place in Lithuania (that year Vilnius saw the founding of a sakura, a Japanese cherry garden⁴⁸). The note carries a surprising piece of information, namely that Sugihara “during the war issued visas to **six thousand Lithuanian Jews** [emphasis mine – AH], thus rescuing them from extermination”. The same topic was addressed in the magazine in 2005 by Dariusz Baliszewski. His article titled *Armia Janów Bondów* [*The Army of Jan Bonds*] was inspired by the report published in 2005 by the Head Office of State Archives and based on new, previously unpublished source material.⁴⁹ The article briefly recounts the most important actions of Polish intelligence (in collaboration with the British); among these the author included the action of issuing Japanese transit visas to Polish (Polish, not Lithuanian) war refugees in Lithuania. Baliszewski attributed this action exclusively to Polish intelligence: “A large-scale action was carried out in Lithuanian territories in 1940 and 1941 from where **Polish intelligence officers managed to transfer through Russia** [emphasis mine – AH] tens of thousands of Jews”.⁵⁰ My view is that in the light of the documents and recollections of the refugees, Polish intelligence must have played only a minor role in organising the transfer of refugees through the USSR to Japan. Polish intelligence greatly helped the refugees in obtaining Polish travel documents as well as Japanese visas.⁵¹ But as far as the exit visas from the USSR are concerned, it is more likely that it was Sugihara who helped the refugees in obtaining them.⁵² Baliszewski tries to diminish

⁴⁸ “Bez granic”, *Wprost*, 41 (2001), <http://www.wprost.pl/ar/11304/Bez-granic/?pg=1> (access: 24.01.2011).

⁴⁹ *Polsko-brytyjska współpraca*.

⁵⁰ D. Baliszewski, “Armia Janów Bondów”, *Wprost*, 28 (2005), pp. 66–68. <http://www.wprost.pl/ar/78508/Armia-Janow-Bondow/> (access: 24.01.2011).

⁵¹ Kuromiya and Peplowski pointed out that “there exist several versions concerning the circumstances in which the refugees left Poland. According to the most reliable opinions some people received fake identity cards and birth certificates, obtained through the agency of the intelligence unit of the Union for Armed Struggle in Vilnius. On the basis of these documents one could receive a transit visa from the Japanese consulate. But some refugees of Jewish descent were given fake visas produced by the collaborators of the ‘Willow Tree’ network or Capt. Jakubianiec”, Kuromiya, Peplowski, *Między Warszawą a Tokio*, p. 474.

⁵² Pałasz-Rutkowska and Romer quote from Sugihara: “I have gained information on the Soviet transit visas for travelling through the USSR. The Soviet consulate explained to me that they were ready to issue their visas, provided that the Japanese ones were issued first”. *Historia stosunków polsko-japońskich...* 2009, p. 256. L. Tomaszewski also wrote that “Sugihara secured the consent of the Soviet Union for the transit of Polish refugees through its territory”, Tomaszewski, *Wileńszczyzna lat wojny*, p. 126.

the role of Sugihara in this action, makes no mention of Zwartendijk, and, surprisingly, estimates the number of the rescued at 50,000 people. Another article by the same author, published also in *Wprost* two years later, leaned in a similar direction: Baliszewski reduced the number of the refugees rescued thanks to the visas issued by Sugihara to “merely a few hundred people”.⁵³ Such ignoring of reliable data from historical records and scholarly studies constitutes proof that in the world of journalism unsubstantiated claims are being formulated and circulate, especially in the Internet. On account of their being widely accessible, these claims shape and perpetuate historical knowledge by becoming firmly rooted in social awareness. In this particular case it is even more regrettable, for in Poland there are only so few “places of remembrance” of the “visas for life” – there is a lack of monuments, museum exhibitions, and publications devoted to this topic.

The year 2007 was indeed revolutionary in terms of the commemoration of Sugihara in Poland. The Japanese consul was then posthumously awarded the Commander’s Cross with Star of the Order of Polonia Restituta; also in 2007 the Borderland Centre in Sejny held two-day celebrations dedicated mainly to commemorating the role of Sugihara in the rescuing of Polish war refugees. In the same year, the periodical *Kombatant* (the bulletin of the Office for War Veterans and Victims of Oppression) included two long articles about the activities of Sugihara and Polish intelligence, and about the action of issuing visas to Japan. The article “Visas for life” written by Ewa Pałasz-Rutkowska discussed the basic facts concerning the activities of Zwartendijk, Sugihara, a number of Polish intelligence officers, and Tadeusz Romer, all of whom contributed to the action of issuing the so-called “visas for life” and made it possible for the refugees to travel from Lithuania to Japan through the USSR. Despite the substantial number of names, dates and other details, the article was written in a very accessible manner. In addition to that, it included quotations from the previously unpublished memories of two of the main protagonists in those events, namely Daszkiewicz and Romer.⁵⁴ The other article⁵⁵ is a reprint of a publication which had appeared in the *Biuletyn Polskiego Instytutu Naukowego w Kanadzie* [Bulletin of the Polish Scientific Institute in Canada] in 1993 and was made available on the Internet in 2003. Its author focused on Ambassador Romer and the various ways in which he helped Polish refugees. It is an important contribution, given that these activities of Tadeusz Romer are little known in Poland, much in the same way as those of Sugihara and Zwartendijk.

⁵³ D. Baliszewski, “Archiwum zdrady”, *Wprost*, 24 (2007), pp. 82–85. <http://www.wprost.pl/ar/116561/Archiwum-zdrady/?pg=1> (access: 24.01.2011).

⁵⁴ E. Pałasz-Rutkowska, “Wizy życia”, *Kombatant. Biuletyn Urzędu do Spraw Kombatantów i Osób Represjonowanych*, 6 (2007), pp. 18–20.

⁵⁵ Guryń, A., “Tadeusza Romera Pomoc Żydom Polskim na Dalekim Wschodzie”, *Kombatant. Biuletyn Urzędu Do Spraw Kombatantów i Osób Represjonowanych*, 6 (2007), pp. 21–23 (access: 24.01.2011).

At the turn of 2010 and 2011, *Newsweek Polska* published two articles to familiarise the Polish reader with the accomplishments of Sugihara. It is unusual for reporters for weekly magazines to refer to the sources and specify the origin of the information which they make available. Nevertheless, it seems that these articles, in addition to the aforementioned scholarly publications, are the most comprehensive attempt available in Polish at portraying Sugihara and his action of issuing “visas for life”. In the article *Posłaniec Boga*⁵⁶ [*A Messenger of God*], Dagmara Gmitrzak presents the basic historical context of Sugihara’s visa action as well as a short biography of the diplomat. The author referred to his stay in Manchuria and his protest against the brutality of the Japanese authorities towards the Chinese population. In her discussion of Sugihara’s motives, which spurred him to action in Kaunas, she made no reference to that period, but it is noteworthy that she decided to include this episode while presenting a short, two-paragraph long biography of the diplomat. Gmitrzak also noted the educational path of Sugihara, including his refusal to begin studying medicine, against his parents’ wishes, his interest in literature and philology, the compromise decision to go to the school of diplomacy, and his study of the Russian language. The article includes information about Sugihara’s first wife (who was Russian), their divorce and his second marriage with a much younger Japanese woman. Having read the article, the reader is left to ponder the motives which led the Japanese diplomat to engage in such humanitarian and selfless actions, which were so dangerous both to him and his family. The other article published in *Newsweek*, written by Andrzej Krajewski, is focused on the cooperation of Sugihara with Polish intelligence. It was this important part of Sugihara’s activity which most caught the attention of Polish journalists, both in the case of *Newsweek* and other Polish publications (in both printed and online forms). In the article *Japonia. Nasz zapomniany sojusznik*⁵⁷ [*Japan. Our forgotten ally*], Krajewski directly referred to the book written by Andrzej Peplowski and the Japanese historian Hiroaki Kuromiya published not long before.⁵⁸ The journalist presented the Polish reader with a bigger picture of the Polish-Japanese intelligence cooperation, as well as (in a more detailed manner) the joint actions of Sugihara and Polish intelligence officers.

In 2012, *Kurier Galicyjski* published an even more detailed and comprehensive study by Szymon Kazimierski,⁵⁹ which is structured in a similar way to that

⁵⁶ D. Gmitrzak, “Posłaniec Boga”, *Newsweek Polska*, 50 (2010), pp. 78–80. Also available, titled *Boski Posłaniec*, at : [Newsweek.pl](http://swiat.newsweek.pl/boski-poslaniec,69145,1,1.html) (04.12.2010), <http://swiat.newsweek.pl/boski-poslaniec,69145,1,1.html> (access: 01.04.2014).

⁵⁷ A. Krajewski, “Japonia. Nasz zapomniany sojusznik”, *Newsweek Polska*, 3 (2011), pp. 38–40. Also available at: [Newsweek.pl](http://historia.newsweek.pl/japonia--nasz-zapomniany-sojusznik,70867,1,1.html) (24.01.2011), <http://historia.newsweek.pl/japonia--nasz-zapomniany-sojusznik,70867,1,1.html> (access: 12.09.2013).

⁵⁸ Kuromiya, Peplowski, *Między Warszawą a Tokio*.

⁵⁹ S. Kazimierski, “Polak, Japończyk – dwa bratanki” (part 3), *Kurier Galicyjski*, 14 (162) (2012) <http://www.kuriergalicyjski.com/index.php/2012-02-03-12-29-43/podzaborami/990-polak-japoczyk-dwa-bratanki-cz-iii> (access: 07.07.2013).

by Krajewski. Intelligence co-operation between Poland and Japan is presented in a broader historical context (Krajewski begins with the Russo-Japanese war and Piłsudski, while Kazimierski starts with the time of partitioned Poland). Both authors hold that Sugihara’s actions were subordinate to the activity of Polish intelligence officers. Sugihara is mentioned in the first instance, which may be interpreted as stating that he initiated the action; Kazimierski gave the credit to Sugihara for issuing visas to Polish Jews, whereas Krajewski asserted that the action had been a joint effort of the Japanese diplomat and the Poles. The latter author wrote: “Sugihara in cooperation with Capt. Jakubianiec and Lt. Daszkiewicz organised a large-scale action of rescuing Polish refugees by providing them with Japanese visas and transferring over 3,500 people through the USSR to the Country of Cherry Blossoms”.⁶⁰ By contrast, Kazimierski noted: “meanwhile in Kaunas, Sugihara together with Jakubianiec and Daszkiewicz organised the mass action of rescuing Polish Jews, to whom Consul Sugihara issued Japanese exit visas⁶¹ and ten-day transit visas providing the chance of passing through Japan.⁶² As there was a multitude of refugees, visas were being issued literally in thousands”. These brief mentions are the only pieces of information included in the articles which refer to Polish refugees and the action of issuing the visas. Both authors in the further parts of their articles return to the cooperation of Polish intelligence officers with Sugihara and other representatives of Japanese authorities and intelligence.

The actions of Sugihara were presented to Polish readership in, among others, *Lithuania*,⁶³ *Zeszyty Historyczne*⁶⁴ and *Kultura*⁶⁵ published in Paris, *Tygodnik Powszechny*,⁶⁶ and *Midrasz*.⁶⁷

⁶⁰ There is no indication of any active role of Polish intelligence in organising Soviet exit visas, nor in preparing the journey itself (e.g. purchasing train tickets).

⁶¹ The visas issued by Sugihara were not exit visas.

⁶² The visas issued by Sugihara allowed the holders only to pass through Japan; they neither entitled them to stay in Japan for a long time, nor did they make it possible to enter any other country. Incidentally, we know that not all holders of these visas made it to Japan: some of them managed to arrive, directly from the USSR, in Harbin, a city with a sizeable Polish community (Jakubowicz, Hądzulek, *The Polish Jews of Shanghai*).

⁶³ “Lista Sugihary. Japonia też miała swojego Schindlera”, *Lithuania*, 4 (13) (1994), pp. 185–188.

⁶⁴ E. Budzyński, “Poczta japońska”, *Zeszyty Historyczne*, 102 (1992), pp. 203–213; E. Pałasz-Rutkowska, A.T. Romer, “Współpraca polsko-japońska w czasie drugiej wojny światowej”, *Zeszyty Historyczne*, 110 (Paris, 1994), pp. 3–43.

⁶⁵ L. Unger, *Lista Sugihary*; A. Miłosz, “Japoński szlak z litewskiej pułapki”, *Kultura* (Paris, June 2000), pp. 153–156.

⁶⁶ E. Kotarska, “Lista Sugihary. Z prof. Hillelem Levine’em – autorem książki o japońskim konsulu z Kowna, który podczas wojny uratował kilka tysięcy Żydów – rozmawia Elżbieta Kotarska”, *Tygodnik Powszechny*, 44 (29.10.2000), p. 7.

⁶⁷ M. Siekacz, “Diaspora żydowska w Japonii w latach 1853–1945”, *Midrasz*, 3 (119) (March 2007), pp. 30–38.

Sources available on the Internet

The biography of Sugihara and the history of issuing the visas to Polish refugees is present in a number of Polish websites, including that of the Polish embassy in Japan and that of the Japanese embassy in Poland. The Polish-language Wikipedia⁶⁸ includes a fairly long text about Sugihara presenting the Polish version of information and containing a comment that “he is at times referred to as the Japanese Schindler”. As opposed to most of the journalistic articles, the Wikipedia text does not emphasise the cooperation between the Japanese diplomat and Polish intelligence. Even though this cooperation is mentioned (as is the Dutch Consul Zwartendijk), the visa action is generally attributed to Sugihara. A different interpretation of Sugihara’s action is presented in the Internet portal [konnichiwa.pl](http://www.konnichiwa.pl)⁶⁹ in the article by Jacek Kicman written in 2007 and expanded in 2010:⁷⁰ the idea and initiative of issuing visas to the refugees is attributed to Polish intelligence.⁷¹ As a result, the presented views are just the opposite of what could have been expected: the entry in Polish Wikipedia emphasises the role of the Japanese consul, while a Polonocentric standpoint dominates on the portal of Japan-focused enthusiasts. This paradox testifies to the fact that the information about Sugihara which is available to the Poles is incoherent, fragmentary, and dispersed. There is no uniform Polish narrative on this topic which could be considered predominant.

Artistic work

The topic of Sugihara and the Poles rescued by him has attracted very little attention from Polish artists. Since the mid-1990s, when this topic was being widely discussed around the world, also in Japan,⁷² there have been calls for producing a film in Hollywood about this piece of history, one which could match the success of *Schindler’s List*. In 1997, Andrzej Miłosz directed the Polish

⁶⁸ http://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chiune_Sugihara.

⁶⁹ An Internet portal about Japan edited by Poles.

⁷⁰ <http://www.konnichiwa.pl/japonski-konsul,2,374.html#>.

⁷¹ “In all probability, this idea was born in the units of Polish intelligence, still active in Lithuania; it is also possible that it came from the structures of the Underground State, which was then coming into existence”. He added: “this is not a historical study, so let the specialists explain the details. The fact is that an agreement was made between two consuls: the Dutch consul Jan Zwartendijk and the Japanese consul Chiune Sugihara”, *ibid*.

⁷² Sugihara Chiune was vindicated by the Japanese Government in 1991, most likely because he had been awarded the title of a “Righteous Among the Nations” by Yad Vashem and because of the ever more growing awareness and popularity of the “visas for life”. Having been vindicated, he was awarded a number of prizes in Japan. Monuments were built to his name, museums were opened, there were also a number of documentary films and books, including the biography written by his wife – there was a real “boom” in the memory of Sugihara in Japan and the USA.

film *Wizy życia*⁷³ [*Visas for Life*]. This documentary has an extraordinary historical value, for it presents interviews, priceless from the present perspective, with the participants and eyewitnesses of the events of 1940, including the people who forged documents.⁷⁴ The story, however, does not seem to have aroused much interest from the Polish public. As Miłosz wrote in 2000: “What about the film? Well, it is stored somewhere on the shelves in the television centre and has been waiting a couple of years already, because public television competes with commercial television broadcasters for viewers and advertisements, while it is reported that historical topics have a very limited viewership”.⁷⁵ Today, the film is nearly inaccessible in Poland,⁷⁶ although it is routinely shown in the Museum of Sugihara in Kaunas as one of the many films included in the exhibition.

Given such limited knowledge and popularity of the history of the “visas for life” in Poland, I was surprised to note that it provided inspiration for a book for children written by Joanna Rudniańska.

Events

The exhibition mentioned above about Tadeusz Romer in the Ignacy Paderewski Museum of Polish Emigration in Łazienki Park in Warsaw has so far been the only museum event in Poland which has made reference to the history of “visas for life” and, more specifically, its later chapters taking place in Japan and Shanghai. In Poland, interest in the life of Tadeusz Romer is due primarily to his role as the ambassador of the Polish government in exile in London to the USSR, a role taken by the diplomat soon after the evacuation of the Polish embassy from Japan and Shanghai. It is worth noting that his actions for the benefit of war refugees in the Far East were particularly emphasised and certainly contributed to some extent to the popularisation of this topic among the Poles. The exhibition was planned to be open to the public from December 2006 to May 2007, but it turned out to be so popular that it remained available for visitors for several months; after it was eventually closed,⁷⁷ most of the materials were made available online. In the absence of other museum exhibitions (both permanent and temporary), the virtual exhibition about Romer has been the only Polish museum initiative which provided space for the history of the “visas for life” and the Polish war refugees who owed their life to this action.

⁷³ *Wizy życia*, directed by A. Miłosz and P. Weychert, produced by Mirosław Chojecki, Grupa Filmowa “Kontakt” and Film Polski, 1997.

⁷⁴ Barbasiewicz, Konsul Sugihara Chiune.

⁷⁵ Miłosz, Japoński szlak z litewskiej pułapki.

⁷⁶ I had an opportunity to watch it in the library of the “Borderland Centre” in Sejny, courtesy of Agata Szkopińska.

⁷⁷ Afterwards it was exhibited in the Polish embassy in Tokio in 2008.

In 2001, the Japanese theatre “Dora” came on tour to Poland with their performance titled *Sempo Sugihara*.⁷⁸ As regards cinema events, it is worth noting that during the third edition of the Warsaw Jewish Film Festival in 2005 two films were screened about the “visas for life” action, although both were foreign productions – *Sugihara: Conspiracy of Kindness* (2001) and *Escape to Shanghai* (2005).

The first meeting in the series “Not only Schindler”, organised in 2012 by the Historical Museum of the City of Cracow together with Fundacja Nowych Ujęć,⁷⁹ was dedicated to the memory of Sugihara Chiune. In the programme of the event the organisers included a screening of the Polish film *Visas for life* directed by Andrzej Miłosz, which took place in Oskar Schindler’s Factory. Would that mean that in Poland there is a steadily growing interest in this history?

By far the most important event in cultivating the memory of Sugihara and his actions and merit in rescuing refugees, particularly Polish citizens of Jewish origins, was held in Sejny in June 2007 on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the re-establishment of Polish-Japanese diplomatic relations.⁸⁰

It was organised by the “Borderland of Arts, Cultures, and Nations Centre”, a laboratory of innovative intercultural practices founded and headed by Krzysztof Czyżewski. It is housed in the renovated buildings of the former Jewish district of Sejny, in the centre of the old town, and situated between the Polish and Lithuanian cultural centres. After the end of the era of nationalism, wars, and the communist regime, after so many years of living apart and in the wake of the erosion of memory, the founders of the “Borderland” set out to rebuild the Sejny agora, a space for meetings and dialogue, with the aim of restoring the “connective tissue” between people, generations and nations, between the past and the present day, between tradition and modernity.⁸¹

The two-day celebrations (24–26 June 2007) took place under the high patronage of the President of Poland Lech Kaczyński and the Japanese Ambassador to

⁷⁸ The “Dora” Theatre played this performance also in Lithuania and the USA.

⁷⁹ “Not only Schindler” is a series of meetings, co-organised by Fundacja Nowych Ujęć in the cinema of the museum Oskar Schindler’s Factory in Cracow. Meetings are held once a month; the main part of the programme is the screening of a film, preceded by a meeting with an expert who provides the audience with an introduction to the subject and begins the discussion which follows the screening’, [http://www.fnu.org.pl/projekty/nie-tylko-schindler/\(01.02.2014\)](http://www.fnu.org.pl/projekty/nie-tylko-schindler/(01.02.2014)). In 2012, two meetings were held, while from March 2013 onwards the meetings are held regularly every week.

⁸⁰ In the view of Yoshido Umeda, one of the participants in these celebrations, it was the first international event of this type in Poland offering a tribute to this Japanese diplomat (*Sila bezsilnych*. Materiały z uroczystości w “Ośrodku Pogranicza”, p. 5).

⁸¹ “Ośrodek ‘Pogranicze’ – pamięć, edukacja, współistnienie”, in: *Limes Pontes Agora. Opowieść o nowym pograniczu Europy w ośmiu odsłonach*, concept, synopsis, and text: M. Sporek-Czyżewska, K. Czyżewski. Sejny, 2010, p. 45. See also K. Czyżewski, *Linia powrotu. Zapiski z pogranicza*, Sejny, 2008; id., “Edukacja na sejneńskiej agorze”, in: *Kultura dialogu*, ed. J. Sonetra-Szeliga, R. Kusek, Kraków, 2008.

Poland Tanabe Ruichi. The key part of the event, attended by representatives of central and local government and also a delegation from Lithuania,⁸² was the seminar *The power of the powerless. Chiune Sugihara and the circle of solidarity with people seeking refuge in the time of the Holocaust*. The motto of the seminar was an old Japanese proverb: “Even a hunter cannot kill a bird which flies to him for refuge”. Sugihara would respond with this phrase when asked the question of why he had risked his own life and career for the sake of rescuing other people.

The participants in the seminar could listen to a number of presentations. The Japanese ambassador emphasised the importance of the meeting and its aim to direct the attention of society to the values which lay at the core of Sugihara’s action, namely the right of every human being to live in a world without fear. Ewa Junczyk-Ziomecka, a minister in the Chancellery of the President of Poland, in the letter addressed to the participants in the conference, called attention to the fact that the Jews rescued by Sugihara were Polish citizens, that Sugihara himself was named “Righteous among the Nations” by Yad Vashem, and that he is remembered by some of the survivors as a “malakh”, i.e. an angel. Egidijus Aleksandrovicius gave a detailed discussion of Sugihara’s activity in Lithuania, stressing that Kaunas in 1940 played the role of “the Casablanca of northern Europe”.

The extensive presentation by Ewa Pałasz-Rutkowska drew attention to Sugihara’s action, the rescue of many Poles and Jews – Polish citizens – owing to the “visas for life”, and to the co-operation with the officers of Polish intelligence: Hryncewicz, Jakubianiec, and Daszkiewicz. Yoshido Umeda discussed many personal topics concerning the diplomatic work of Sugihara and his co-operation with the Polish ambassador to Japan, Tadeusz Romer. Chiharu Inaba, a professor at Meijo University in Nagoya, shared his insights on the historical aspects of Japanese-Polish co-operation. He also emphasised the fact that Sugihara, guided by humanitarian principles, paid no heed to the orders of the Japanese government and by issuing transit visas saved the lives of many Jews of Polish citizenship.

The event included also the opening of an exhibition dedicated to the memory of Sugihara and the screening of the film *Visas for Life* by Andrzej Miłosz. The Sejny Group of Scouting Instructors of the Polish Scouting and Guiding Association took Sugihara Chiune as their patron. Meetings and competitions were organised in schools, including the Polish-Lithuanian competition for young people concerning the actions of the Japanese diplomat. The park of the High School in Sejny was named after him; the event was commemorated by the unveiling of a stone plaque with the name of the park surrounded by “Sugihara flowers”. The Klezmer Band of the Sejny Theatre played a concert in the White Synagogue.

The event was publicised in the media: in the Białystok edition of *Gazeta Wyborcza*, *Wieści Sejneńskie*, *Przegląd Sejneński*, and on the Internet. The library

⁸² The materials from the celebrations in the “Borderland Centre”.

of the “Borderland Centre” holds a several-hours-long DVD recording of these celebrations; I had an opportunity to watch it in 2013.

Thus, on the initiative of Krzysztof Czyżewski, the director of the “Borderland Centre” in Sejny, Sugihara Chiune, the “Japanese Schindler”, was duly commemorated: his action of issuing the “visas for life” to so many Polish Jews as well as his cooperation with Polish intelligence deserve not only our recognition, but also international acclaim.

Honours and medals

As has been already stated, Sugihara was posthumously awarded two Polish distinctions: the Commander’s Cross of the Order of Merit of the Republic of Poland for his cooperation with Polish intelligence during WWII (1996) and the Commander’s Cross with Star of the Order of Polonia Restituta for his action of rescuing Jews (2007). During the ceremony of decoration of 53 people engaged in rescuing Jews from extermination during WWII, held in Teatr Wielki on 10 October 2007, the President of Poland Lech Kaczyński emphasised the circumstances which the awardees had to face: “in those days, to defend the life of a Jew or a person of Jewish origin meant risking not only one’s own life, but also the lives of all family members, or, as it happened, the lives of all the inhabitants of the building or even the entire village [...]. For this reason, people in Poland who were rescuing Jews demonstrated a heroism of the highest order. They were absolutely determined to defend others from harm. For this reason, they deserve the same honour as the most valiant soldiers”.⁸³

Among other people who were posthumously awarded the Commander’s Cross of Polonia Restituta was also Tadeusz Romer, formerly Polish ambassador to Japan.

Summary and conclusions

The material presented above leads to the conclusion that the knowledge about and the memory of Sugihara in our country is far from satisfactory, as is also the case with the activities of the Polish military and diplomatic service, Jewish organisations, and associations of refugees. This situation is due to a number of factors, including the dispersed and fragmentary studies of this topic.

Particularly when compared to Lithuania, it is evident that in Poland there are far fewer places of remembrance dedicated to Sugihara. The most conspicuous difference can be seen in museum exhibitions: Lithuania has the Museum of Sugihara in Kaunas (in the building of the former Japanese consulate), which is active in the field of education, while the Jewish Museum in Vilnius is home to

⁸³ *Wprost*, 10.10.2007, pp. 16–19.

special exhibitions devoted to Sugihara and the Jews rescued by him (both in the Holocaust exhibition in the “Green House”, with the monument of Sugihara placed in front of the building, and in the new “Centre for Tolerance”). The only such place in Poland is the park at the High School in Sejny with the stone with a commemorative plaque dedicated to Sugihara. Lithuania has many places where the Japanese diplomat is commemorated, including the streets named after him in Kaunas and Vilnius as well as the sizeable park of cherry trees in the centre of the Lithuanian capital city, where another monument of Sugihara is situated. At Vytautas Magnus University in Kaunas there is also a lecture hall dedicated to his name, next to the hall named after Zwartendijk, and a plaque at the entrance commemorating their noble action. It is also worth noting that in Lithuania a special prize for tolerance and for promoting tolerance is named after Sugihara and that the Lithuanian Post Office issued a postage stamp with his portrait.⁸⁴ For obvious reasons, more places dedicated to the memory of Sugihara can be found in Japan and in the countries where the refugees saved by him ultimately settled.

The following conclusions, which take the form of four necessities, can thus be drawn:

1. The necessity of providing a full, exhaustive bibliography of the topic and the state of the question and related research as well as preparing a monograph *Visas for Life*, one which would give the most comprehensive account of the activities of Sugihara and Polish intelligence.

2. The necessity of editing a collection of documents: a list of the recipients of the “visas for life”, reports of the refugee council and other material from private collections, archives and museums; as well as materials about the lives of people rescued from the Holocaust thanks to the “visas for life”. There is also a need for a collection of information on the films and other works of art, exhibitions, conferences, and places of remembrance dedicated to Sugihara and his cooperation with Polish intelligence.

3. The necessity of including the topic of the “visas for life” in museums, both existing and in the process of organisation, such as the Museum of Polish Jews and the Museum of World War II.

4. The necessity of making efforts in order to use the channels of mass communication for popularising the “visas for life” action and the memory of this extremely important undertaking, which saved many lives of Polish refugees.

Abstract

This article examines the historical memory of the act of issuing over 2,000 visas to Polish Jews by the Japanese Consul in Lithuania, Sugihara Chiune. Sugihara’s “visas for life” are memorialised heavily in Japan, in the countries where the refugees ultimately settled (Israel,

⁸⁴ www.lituanicaonstamps.com/en/rinkiniai_sugihara.php.

United States, Canada and Australia), and in Lithuania. However, in Poland the story is barely known, and it does not seem to form part of the national narrative of survival during WWII. Is it because the refugees were Polish Jews, and, as such, they do not belong to either the Polish or the Jewish historical memory? The study of Polish “sites of memory” (Pierre de Nora’s *lieux de mémoire*) revealed that in Poland this topic attracts researchers primarily in the field of Japanese Studies, and not in Jewish Studies or WWII Studies. The presence of this story in the media and popular culture is scattered and fragmented. In terms of institutional memory and memorialisation of this act, Sugihara twice was granted (posthumously) high state awards by the Republic of Poland, but there are no monuments, no streets named after him, no museum exhibits dedicated to “visas for life” – in stark contrast to Lithuania. It is even more remarkable that stories of survival of an estimated 6,000 refugees – Polish citizens, do not attract public interest in Poland. The article concludes that a number of new “sites of memory” are needed in Poland to properly commemorate Sugihara’s act of issuing visas, and the fate of thousands of Polish Jews who escaped the Holocaust.

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