

# **FLIGHT AND RESCUE**

## **A United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Special Exhibition**

The outbreak of war in September 1939 trapped more than three million Jews in German- and Soviet-occupied Poland. Only a tiny minority would escape the terror that culminated in the Holocaust. In late 1940 and early 1941 – just months before the mass killings of the Holocaust began – 2,100 Polish Jews fled to the Far East and points beyond. The long flight took them 6,000 miles east from their first refuge in Lithuania aboard the Trans-Siberian Railroad and steamer to Japan. For many of them, the final exile was in Shanghai.

Few of these refugees could have reached safety without the tireless efforts of many individuals. Several Jewish organizations and Jewish communities along the way provided funds and other help. But the most critical assistance came from unexpected sources: representatives of the Dutch government-in-exile and of Nazi Germany's ally, Japan. Their humanitarian activity in the summer of 1940 was the pivotal act of rescue for hundreds of Jews taking refuge in Lithuania.

*“We had memorized atlases and the globe and had become experts in outlining to ambassadors and consuls the most intricate travel routes. Where no route existed, it was for us to create one — if only on paper, for the time being.”*

—Refugee leader Zorach Warhaftig, postwar memoir

## FLIGHT

### **The German and Soviet Invasions of Poland**

Following the German invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939, hundreds of thousands of Jews and countless other Polish citizens fled eastward ahead of the German advance. On September 17, under a secret agreement with Germany, Soviet troops occupied eastern Poland, where an estimated 300,000 Jewish refugees accepted Soviet rule as the lesser of two evils and stayed. Some 40,000 Jews continued south into Romania and Hungary or northeast into Lithuania, fearing arrest by either the Nazis or the Soviets, or hoping to emigrate abroad from unoccupied territory.

As news spread of the impending October transfer of Vilna and its environs from Soviet to Lithuanian control, thousands of Jews streamed to the centuries-old center of Jewish culture. Once the new international borders were sealed, crossing into Lithuania became risky, and many who tried were turned back.

***“Panic, departures en masse. . . . Throngs are leaving their homes on a dangerous migration to an uncertain future.”***

—Diarist Dawid Sierakowiak, Lodz, Poland, September 6, 1939

***“Our country had been swallowed up by two greedy and cynical powers, each intent on world domination. Polish Jewry, numbering three and a half million and constituting the largest Jewish community on earth, was now in mortal danger.”***

—Refugee leader Zorach Warhaftig, postwar memoir

## **REFUGE**

### **Temporary Haven in Lithuania**

In the fall and winter of 1939, an estimated 15,000 Polish Jews found temporary refuge in politically independent Lithuania, most of them in Vilna. The majority belonged to a diverse, educated elite who faced persecution in war-torn Poland for their Jewish cultural, political, and religious affiliations. Some families simply had the financial means to escape the dangers of war and occupation. Many refugees wanted eventually to reach the United States or Palestine.

Having fled with few belongings and barred from employment in Lithuania, most refugees were forced to depend on others. The largest share of relief support and funds came through an American Jewish charitable organization, the Joint Distribution Committee. Uncertain of their future and consumed by fears about relatives still in occupied Poland, the refugees could only hope that war would end soon or that Lithuania's neutrality would remain undisturbed. Neither thought proved to be realistic.

### **Profile of the Refugees**

The largely adult male refugee population included organized groups of Zionist youth whose goal was to build a Jewish homeland in Palestine, and rabbis and students from Poland's prewar religious schools (yeshivas). Both resumed their studies and training activities in Lithuania. There were also businessmen, lawyers, teachers, journalists, and physicians, many resigned to unemployment or volunteer work in the refugee community. In soup kitchens and cafes, writers and political activists met to discuss news of the war. For some, emigration was stalled because Lithuania's authorities, fearful of endangering its neutrality, prohibited Polish citizens of military age from leaving the country.

***“The Jews who fled to Lithuania were those who were equally in danger from the German and Soviet occupiers.”***

—Zionist leader Moshe Kleinbaum, Vilna, March 12, 1940

### **Zorach Warhaftig**

Zorach Warhaftig was a lawyer from Warsaw and a leader of the religious Zionist *He-Halutz Mizrachi*. As a refugee, he led efforts to rescue Zionists from occupied Poland and set up training farms for them outside Vilna. Working for the Palestine Commission for Polish Refugees in Lithuania, Warhaftig’s activities supported *aliyah*, immigration to Palestine. He helped 500 refugees get there through Scandinavia and France before the German invasion of western Europe blocked this route. With his assistance, 700 persons escaped through Turkey in early 1941.

### **Relief Operations**

A myriad of agencies worked with the Lithuanian government and Red Cross to provide relief for the Jewish refugees. The largest was the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, which channeled funds through Jewish refugee aid committees in Vilna and Kaunas. The “Joint” sent a dynamic American, Moses Beckelman, to work with Yitzhak Gitterman, a refugee who had moved the organization’s Warsaw office to Vilna. The energetic team set up group homes and soup kitchens, distributed clothes and shoes, and provided other services.

*“Had it not been for the money made available by the Joint . . . [we] would have found...derelicts here.*

—American relief worker Samuel Schmidt, March 17, 1940

### **Moses Beckelman**

A social worker from New York City, Moses Beckelman began his career with the “Joint” in 1939. In Lithuania he proved an astute negotiator as he struggled to support the refugees in the

face of a maze of government regulations and limited financial resources. In December 1939 Beckelman left Lithuania with reports detailing Nazi persecution of Jews in occupied Poland, but the Germans stopped the ship in the Baltic Sea and arrested all Polish nationals of military age aboard. Beckelman was allowed to return to Lithuania, where he assisted the refugees until February 1941.

### **Fears for Family in Occupied Poland**

The refugees worried constantly about loved ones back home. While all Polish citizens alike suffered during the early months of the German occupation of Poland, the segregation and Nazi persecution of Jews included roundups for forced labor, orders to wear special markings, and the establishment in Lodz of the first major ghetto confining Jews. Many refugees attempted to bring family members into Lithuania, but for every one person who entered the country illegally, another failed. Many Jews never tried to flee because of the risks of arrest and their wishes to remain with elderly parents or young children.

## SOVIET TAKEOVER

### Danger for Refugees

On June 15, 1940, Soviet forces occupied Lithuania. Soon after, Communist authorities began transforming the country's economy and government. Following a rigged plebiscite, Lithuania formally became the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic on August 4.

The new regime unleashed the Soviet secret police, then called the NKVD, to target anti-Communists on both the political left and right. In Vilna and Kaunas, politically active refugees laid low, some assuming false identities. Lacking permanent residence and employment, all refugees were vulnerable. Many did not want the relative safety of declaring Soviet citizenship because that would end their hopes of returning home. The alternative, however, meant risking deportation as “unreliable elements” to Siberia and other barren locations, a fate already suffered by tens of thousands of refugees living in Soviet-occupied eastern Poland.

*“Smoke is felt in the air. . . . The whole day Soviet tanks ride by. Something is going to happen and we poor refugees tremble.”*

—Rose Shoshana Kahan, Vilna, June 14, 1940

*“Arrests are being made consistently and so silently, usually under cover of night, that a veritable pall has descended over the country.”*

—U.S. consul Owen Norem, Kaunas, July 25, 1940

## **RESCUERS**

### **Help from Dutch and Japanese Diplomats**

After the Soviet takeover of Lithuania, the refugees once more felt trapped. Germany's invasion of western Europe a few weeks earlier and the fall in succession of the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, and France shattered any illusions of a quick end to war in the west.

Options for escape were few, and all required diplomatic permits – visas – to cross international borders. When the Soviets ordered all diplomatic consulates closed by August 25, 1940, time also began to run out. Without visas, the refugees would be stuck in Communist Lithuania.

For a fortunate few, the way out of immediate danger proved to be an eastward, Asian route using an odd combination of permits: a bogus visa for entrance to the Dutch Caribbean island of Curaçao that few had even heard of, and a visa for transit through Japan. These precious papers were issued by foreign envoys responding to the human crisis at their doorstep.

### **Immigration Restrictions**

The refugees' preferred destinations were the United States and British-controlled Palestine, but rigorous laws and policies restricted entrance to both. The only hope was to bypass standard immigration procedures with the help of organizations abroad. Even with sponsorship, however, time ran out when the consulates in Lithuania closed. The American consul was able to issue only 55 visas, while the British envoy managed to release 700 Palestine certificates to Zionist youth, rabbis, and other groups. Hundreds of others still needed visas.

### **Help from the Dutch**

The breakthrough in the visa dilemma came unexpectedly at the Kaunas consulate for the Netherlands. L. P. J. de Decker, the Dutch ambassador to the Baltic States, authorized his acting consul in Lithuania, Jan Zwartendijk, to issue permits declaring that "an entrance visa is not

required for the admission of aliens to Surinam, Curaçao, and other Dutch possessions in America.” Omitted, in a conscious deceit, was the key fact that admission was the prerogative of the colonial governors, who rarely allowed it.

*“If anybody deserves the title ‘Angel of Curaçao’ . . . it is His Excellency de Decker, who provided me the successful text for the pseudo-visa.”*

—Jan Zwartendijk, postwar testimony

### **L. P. J. de Decker**

*His Excellency the Ambassador*

During his 34-year career in the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, L. P. J. de Decker served as a diplomat in Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. In 1939 he became ambassador in Riga, Latvia. After the Soviets ordered all consulates in the Baltic States to close, de Decker went to Stockholm. He died in 1948, leaving no comment on his pivotal role in providing the pseudo-visas.

### **Jan Zwartendijk**

*“Mr. Philips Radio”*

Jan Zwartendijk had been working for Philips, a Dutch manufacturer of light bulbs and radios, for four years when he became director of its Lithuanian operations in May 1939. The Soviets’ seizure of his Philips office in Kaunas in early August 1940 ended his work and his issuing of “Curaçao visas.” A month later, Zwartendijk returned to the German-occupied Netherlands to work in Philips’s main office in Eindhoven. For years, many of those grateful for his help knew Zwartendijk only as “Mr. Philips Radio.”

*“The Japanese consul who provided the transit visas in the passports provided a funny note during this period of calamity. He requested several times by telephone not to issue the visas so fast. He could not keep up, the street was full of waiting people.”*

—Jan Zwartendijk, postwar testimony

## **Japanese Transit Visas**

Escaping war-torn Europe to reach Curaçao meant crossing the Pacific Ocean, a route made possible by Japan’s acting consul to Lithuania, Chiune Sugihara. In the absence of clear instructions from Tokyo, he granted 10-day visas to transit Japan to hundreds of refugees who held Curaçao destination visas. Before closing his consulate, Sugihara even gave visas to refugees who, lacking any travel papers, had only the hope of leaving Lithuania to obtain a U.S. visa elsewhere.

*“I finally decided that it was completely useless to continue the discussions with Tokyo. I was merely losing time, as I had a lot of other things to do regarding the evacuation of the consulate. . . I started to issue Japanese transit visas without official permission.”*

—Chiune Sugihara, postwar interview

## **Chiune Sugihara**

### *Japanese Imperial Consul*

Chiune Sugihara was the first Japanese diplomat posted in Lithuania. Fluent in Russian learned from Russian émigrés during 16 years in Harbin, Manchuria, he was sent to Kaunas late in 1939 to provide intelligence on Soviet and German troop movements. After he left Lithuania in early September 1940, Sugihara climbed the ranks as a second-tier diplomat assigned to Prague, Koenigsberg, and Bucharest. When Sugihara returned to American-occupied Japan in 1947, the Foreign Ministry retired him with a small pension as part of a large staff reduction.

## **Cable Traffic**

After issuing some 1,800 visas, Sugihara finally received a response to his cables alerting the Foreign Ministry in Tokyo of the situation in Lithuania. On August 16, 1940, Tokyo reported that people with his visas headed for the U.S. and Canada had arrived without money or final destination visas. “You must make sure that they have finished their procedure for their entry visas and they must also possess travel money and money that they need during their stay in Japan. Otherwise, you should not give them a transit visa.”

In his response, sent around September 1, Sugihara admitted to issuing visas to people who had not completed all arrangements for destination visas. He explained the extenuating circumstances: Japan was the only transit country available for going in the direction of the United States, and his visas were needed to depart the Soviet Union. Sugihara suggested that travelers who arrived in the Soviet port of Vladivostok with incomplete paperwork should not be allowed to board ship for Japan. Tokyo wrote back that the Soviet Union insisted that Japan honor all visas already issued by its consulates.

## **Japanese Policy toward Jews**

In a late 1938 cable, the Foreign Ministry informed its embassies that adopting an anti-Jewish stance was not in Japan’s interests. Jews were to be treated like other foreigners in matters of immigration to Japan. The cable addressed the growing refugee problem. In fall 1938 Jews fleeing Nazi persecution were besieging Japanese consulates in Vienna, Berlin, and other cities of the Reich, seeking certificates to enter Shanghai, then part of the Japanese Empire, and visas for transit through Japan to other destinations.

“It is pivotal for the Empire’s diplomacy to maintain close friendly relationships with Germany and Italy under the present circumstances. We should as a rule avoid actively embracing Jews who are being expelled by our allies, but to radically expel Jews as Germany has done is not in

keeping with the spirit of the Empire's long-standing advocacy of racial equality. It also would bring extremely unfavorable results in the progress of the war effort under the emergency situation that confronts the Empire at the present, especially the need to invite foreign capital for economic development and to avoid any further deterioration of relations with the United States.”

*“The Communists’ power in this country is rapidly expanding. Under the influence of the NKVD many acts of terrorism are occurring. . . . Nearly 100 people come to us daily and Jews throng to our building asking for visas to go to the U.S. via Japan.”*

—Chiune Sugihara, Kaunas, July 28, 1940

## JOURNEY

### Trans-Siberian Route to Japan

The pressure to leave Soviet Lithuania intensified in late 1940, when the government ordered all refugees to declare Soviet citizenship or face exile to Siberia as “unreliable elements.” Encouraged by reports of those who safely traveled on the Trans-Siberian Railroad to the eastern port of Vladivostok, hundreds of Jewish refugees applied for Soviet exit visas. It remains unknown why the Soviets allowed refugees with Polish travel papers, many of dubious validity, to leave. The refugees’ special status, however, gave them the opportunity to emigrate, a prospect denied to Sovietized Lithuanian Jews following the annexation of Lithuania.

Not all refugees helped by Zwartendijk and Sugihara left Lithuania for Japan. Some lacked the American dollars the Soviets demanded for the expensive railroad ticket. Though the Joint Distribution Committee helped pay for hundreds of passages, it could not assist everyone.

*“We were full of mixed feelings of happiness and deep worry. Would we arrive in peace or was this not just another Soviet trick to discover who wanted to escape their ‘Garden of Eden’? . . . Emigration from Communist Russia had been unheard of.”*

—Benjamin Fishoff, postwar memoir

*“As we crossed the sea towards Japan, we waited in quiet anxiety for the day when we should pass beyond Russian territorial waters. It came at last. The Red flag was lowered and the Soviet officials left the ship. Freedom lay ahead. Japan was to be for us really the land of the rising sun.”*

—Oskar Schenker, September 1941

## **STRANDED**

### **Anxious Search for Final Destinations**

Most of the 2,100 Polish Jewish refugees from Lithuania arrived in Kobe, Japan, exhausted and penniless. They revived with devoted care from the local Jewish community and funds from the Joint Distribution Committee. A minority proceeded quickly to the United States and other countries. But for hundreds of others the stay stretched from weeks into months, and many refugees despaired of ever obtaining final destination visas at the American and other consulates they visited.

Uncertainty about the future tempered these transients' appreciation of exotic Japan. Their endless anxieties about loved ones still in occupied Poland worsened with the news that Germany invaded the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941. That July, the United States imposed an embargo on oil exports to Japan, which soon after occupied French Indo-China. The refugees' nervousness mounted at the sight of military exercises in Kobe, a major naval base, as war in the Pacific loomed.

### **Help from Kobe's Jewish Community**

With the consent of Japanese authorities, a representative of the Jewish community in Kobe met the now-destitute refugees upon their arrival in Tsuruga and accompanied them on the train to Kobe. Using funds largely from the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, the Jewish community, led by Anatole Ponevejsky, set up group homes, arranged for housing and food, and interceded on the refugees' behalf in dealings with local officials.

*“One does not think about the exodus from Egypt from long ago, only about the forbidden borders one had to run through...and who knows what is in store for us. Where will we have to run now?”*

—Rose Shoshana Kahan, Passover 1941

### **Anatole Ponevejsky**

Anatole Ponevejsky was born in the Siberian city of Irkutsk. In 1930, he and his brothers moved to Harbin, Manchuria, where they began a business importing woolens from Japan. In 1935, Ponevejsky went to Japan to run the exports side and later settled in Kobe with his wife and two daughters. He organized the Ashkenazi Jewish community of 25 families, renting a building on Yamamoto-Dori Street that housed a synagogue, community center, and in 1940 and 1941, refugee relief offices. After the war, Ponevejsky opened a retail store in Tokyo where Chiune Sugihara briefly worked.

### **New Search for Visas**

The “Curaçao visas” that had enabled the refugees to leave the Soviet Union proved useless for proceeding beyond Japan. Needing valid destination visas, they made the round of consulates in Kobe, Yokohama, and Tokyo. More than 500 Polish Jews succeeded in obtaining U.S. visas, but new war-related immigration restrictions barred hundreds of others sponsored for entry. Certificates for entering Palestine were even scarcer, and arrangements for traveling more complicated and expensive.

*“Menaced by the increasing influx of refugees from Europe of all kinds – among others Jews from Germany, Austria, and the Baltic States – the various countries of America are shutting their doors more and more inexorably against them.”*

—Polish ambassador Tadeusz Romer, Tokyo, January 15, 1941

### **Tadeusz Romer**

A descendant of Polish nobility, Tadeusz Romer became Poland’s ambassador to Japan in February 1937. During 1940 and 1941 he reported detailed information on the Polish refugees in Japan and the assistance that consular officials provided, including issuing proper identity documents, meeting ships at Tsuruga to make formalities easier, and helping some acquire visas

to British dominions. Romer advocated special treatment by Allied countries for Polish refugees in the Far East that was “not subordinated to considerations of race, religion, or political creed.”

### **The “Final Solution” Begins**

While stranded in Japan, the refugees remained anxious about family members from whom they had been separated. Postcards from home provided some comfort, but most communication by mail or telegram ceased after June 22, 1941, when German forces invaded the Soviet Union. In Vilna and elsewhere in captured Soviet territory, the first mass shootings of Jews by the Nazis and their collaborators began the killing phase of the Holocaust. The refugees learned little about these events or the fate of loved ones until after the war.

### **Jewish-Japanese Encounters**

The Japanese public was hospitable as well as intrigued by the refugees. The rabbis and yeshiva students appeared particularly foreign. In Kobe, the refugees caught the interest of the avant-garde Tanpei Photography Club, whose members captured on film many of the refugees in late April 1941. After the war, most refugees remembered the curiosity of the Japanese and noted the absence of antisemitic attitudes and behavior that they had endured in prewar Poland.

*“Notwithstanding Japan’s close relations with Germany, there have been no cases reported of discrimination against Jewish refugees, and newspaper comment has not been unkind.”*

—U.S. vice consul Roy M. Melbourne, Kobe, May 22, 1941

### **“Wandering Jew”**

Members of the Tanpei Shashin Club of Osaka photographed the refugees during two days in April 1941. The Osaka Asahi Kaikan exhibited 22 of their works as “Wandering Jew” in May 1941. Commenting on his portrait of a yeshiva student (“Man”) printed in the magazine *Asahi Camera*, Kaneyoshi Tabushi wrote: “What is floating in the wanderer’s brows is not only

sorrow and misery . . . but also the tenacity of a people gloomily scattered throughout the world. Still they cannot hide their troubles. It is a battle for them not to be defeated.”

### **Final Destinations**

By autumn 1941, more than 1,000 of the Polish Jewish refugees had left Japan for more permanent destinations. Nearly 500 sailed for the United States, and small groups gained permission to enter Canada and other British dominions with the help of Poland’s Ambassador Romer. But close to 1,000 people remained stranded, having failed to secure any destination visa. As Japan prepared for war in the weeks before its attack on Pearl Harbor, police cleared the military port of Kobe. From mid-August to late October 1941, they deported the rest of the refugees to Japanese-occupied Shanghai, China.

## **EXILE**

### **Surviving the War in Shanghai**

The Polish Jewish refugees had heard in Japan that Shanghai was a crowded, unsanitary, and crime-ridden “hellhole.” Still, they were shocked by the sights and smells that greeted them when they disembarked. In the city’s International Settlement, hundreds of thousands of destitute Chinese lived amid a foreign community dominated by a wealthy elite of British and American traders and financiers. The refugees also found an established community of some 4,000 Russian Jews to assist them, and more than 17,000 struggling German and Austrian Jewish refugees who had fled Nazi persecution.

Trapped in Shanghai by the Pacific war, Jewish refugees suffered from shortages of food, clothing, and medicine while enduring unemployment and isolation with no news from their families. They were subjected to countless Japanese decrees and forced into a “designated area” for “stateless refugees.” Nevertheless, Japanese treatment of Jews in Shanghai was comparatively benign, a fact the refugees themselves grasped only at war’s end when they learned about the Holocaust.

### **German-Jewish Refugee Community**

Most of Shanghai’s German and Austrian Jewish refugees lived in crowded, dilapidated housing, the worst off in barracks (ironically called *Heime* or homes) funded by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee. Still, these earlier arrivals were managing. Some had opened small shops and cottage industries. Others had set themselves up as builders and landlords transforming whole segments of Hongkew, an industrial area of the International Settlement heavily damaged in 1932 and 1937 during Sino-Japanese fighting.

### **Laura Margolis**

The only woman on the overseas staff of the “Joint,” Laura Margolis first assisted German

refugees trying to enter Cuba in 1939. She was sent to Shanghai in May 1941, but the outbreak of the Pacific war ended her efforts to help refugees emigrate. Margolis raised funds from Shanghai's Jewish community and administered aid to 8,000 refugees. In early 1942 the Japanese interned her as an enemy alien. Margolis returned to the United States as part of a prisoner exchange in September 1942.

### **“Shanghai Ghetto”**

After Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor, Japanese authorities in Shanghai imposed stricter security measures. Accepting that their Nazi ally had left German and Austrian Jews “stateless” by stripping them of their national citizenship, in early 1943 the Japanese ordered stateless refugees – including Jews from Poland – to live within a “designated area” of the International Settlement. Limited movement and wartime deprivations made life difficult in the “Shanghai ghetto,” as residents called it, though they did not suffer the daily terrors of ghettoized Jews in Europe.

*“This proclamation came as a bombshell to Shanghai Jews. . . . To the refugees this seemed like almost the last thing that could ever happen to them after what they had previously been through.”*

—Laura Margolis, 1944

### **Culture and Politics**

Polish Jewish writers used a Yiddish expression to describe Shanghai: *shond khay*, “a shame of a life.” Despite such sentiments, however, life went on in this foreign and isolated setting. The reading of Yiddish poems, publication of Yiddish and Polish newspapers, and creation of artwork and plays, though sporadic due to logistical problems and Japanese censorship, helped sustain

the remnant of refugees transplanted from Poland. The Japanese forbade overt political expression, but Zionists and Bundists remained surreptitiously active throughout the war.

### **Mir Yeshiva Community**

Refugee yeshiva students spent the war years continuing their studies. They used books reprinted from those few carried to Shanghai from Poland or sent to them from supporters, notably Rabbi Kalmanovich in New York. The Mir Yeshiva gathered in the Beth Aharon Synagogue built by one of the wealthiest members of Shanghai's Sephardic Jewish community. Through the twists of fate and the choices made by their leaders that led them from Poland to Japan and Shanghai, the Mir Yeshiva emerged as the only eastern European yeshiva to survive the Holocaust intact.

### **End of War**

Shortly before the end of the war, an American bombing of industrial Hongkew killed 40 Jewish refugees, including seven Polish Jews, and hundreds of Chinese. The entry of American troops into Shanghai provoked jubilation that was quickly tempered by news of the Holocaust. Most refugees had heard nothing since the spring of 1941 from relatives left behind in occupied Poland. It would take them many more months to learn the fate of individual family members and friends. Approximately six million Jews perished in the Holocaust, of whom three million were Polish Jews.

*“The rumors that all the Jews in Poland were annihilated are true. . . . We Polish refugees go around with tear-stained faces because we left everybody on the other side. Many feel guilty that they survived, when their loved ones died a terrible death.”*

—Rose Shoshana Kahan, Shanghai, September 8, 1945

## **PERISHED**

*“God remember – God remember; we do not ask for more. Just remember the 5,700,000.*

*“Five million seven hundred thousand – the heart bleeds, the hand trembles when writing down such a number.*

*“Three generations we have lost, the old grandfather with his grandchild. Both were slaughtered on the same day. The fields of Poland lament, the trees of Lithuania weep, and cursed Europe is crying –where are our Jews? Why did our earth become a grave for them?”*

## **FAMILY ODYSSEYS**

### **Melamdowicz**

Icchok Melamdowicz was a mathematics teacher and city councilman in Bialystok, Poland, before the war. On September 8, 1939, he fled the city with other prominent citizens frightened of being taken as hostages by the Germans. Icchok did not return home after the Soviets occupied the city a week later, fearing arrest by the Russians. His wife Fejgla and son Lejb joined him in Vilna in late October 1939. In January 1941, five months after receiving two of the last visas signed by Sugihara, the family left Lithuania. That April they sailed from Japan to the United States.

### **Sondheimer**

A German Jew who had fled Nazi Germany in 1934, Moritz Sondheimer owned a small factory for the manufacture of plastic buttons and combs in Kaunas, Lithuania. In summer 1940 the Soviets appropriated the business, and that August he, his wife Setty, and children Hanni and Karl obtained “Curaçao visas” from Zwartendijk and Japanese transit visas from Sugihara. They were among the few recipients who were not Polish citizens. Arriving in Japan in early 1941, the Sondheimers failed to obtain destination visas and were deported in late summer to Shanghai. After the war they immigrated to the United States.

### **Dymant**

On September 5, 1939, law student Jakub Dymant heeded a radio call for all males of military age to leave Warsaw before German forces arrived. On October 23, he reached Vilna. In August 1940, Jakub obtained a “Curaçao visa” from Zwartendijk and a Japanese transit visa from Sugihara and in February 1941 left Lithuania. After five months in Japan, he received a visa for Burma with the help of Poland’s ambassador Tadeusz Romer. In early 1942 Japanese forces attacked Burma, and Jakub fled to India. He came to the United States in 1946.

### **Swislocki**

Before the war Abraham Swislocki was a journalist in Warsaw and his wife Masza an industrial chemist. After the German invasion of Poland, he was called up for military service and later made his way to Vilna. Following a hazardous journey Masza with their son Norbert joined him. On July 27, 1940, the family obtained visas from the Dutch and Japanese consuls in Kaunas, and six months later, left for Japan. Failing to secure passage on a ship sailing to Palestine, the family was forced to pass the war years in Shanghai. They immigrated to the United States in 1947.

### **Szepsenwol**

In 1939 Rykla Szepsenwol, a widow, lived with her daughters Fejga and Chaya in Volozhin in eastern Poland. After the Soviets occupied the town, the girls left for Vilna with friends from their Zionist youth group. A few months later, Rykla hazarded the illegal border crossing to join them. In May 1940 Fejga and Chaya received immigration visas for the United States. Using travel funds provided by relatives living there and a Japanese transit visa from Sugihara, they arrived that fall in the United States from Japan. A year later, Rykla followed her daughters to America.

### **Lifszyc**

David Lifszyc was chief rabbi of Suwalki in northeastern Poland before the war. In late October 1939, after German occupation forces ordered all Jews to leave the Suwalki region, Lifszyc led his family on a perilous flight through swampland to the Lithuanian border. His newborn daughter, Avivit Rashel, died during the crossing. Among the few refugees to obtain Japanese transit visas in Moscow, Rabbi Lifszyc and his wife Cypa and daughter Shulamis crossed Russia on the Trans-Siberian Railroad in March 1941. That May they sailed from Japan for the United States.

*“We felt that we lost everything we ever knew. But at the same time we felt that our life was a gift because it was a miracle – an accident. We tried not to struggle with the question, ‘Why do I deserve to be alive when my brothers died, when my family died?’”*

—Refugee Yonia Fain