



## Integrity

# Chiune Sugihara

**Kovno, Lithuania... August 1940** – In November 1939, Chiune Sugihara, a Japanese diplomat, opened a consulate in Kovno, Lithuania. While his official assignment was to perform diplomatic functions, Chiune's main responsibility was to gather intelligence on German and Soviet troop movements near Lithuania's borders. In June 1940, the Soviet Union invaded Lithuania and ordered all consulates to close by the end of August. On July 27, Chiune saw hundreds of people waiting outside the consulate. He learned that they were Polish Jews trying to escape from the advancing German army.

Chiune agreed to meet with a group of the refugees. The delegation asked him to issue Japanese transit visas to the Jews so that they could travel east across Soviet territory and exit through Japan on their way to other countries. Many of the refugees hoped to reach the Dutch West Indian island of Curaçao, which did not require visas for entry. Even though they had a final destination, they would not be given exit visas by the Soviet Union unless they also had visas permitting them to continue their trip. Chiune was moved by their plea for help.

After the meeting, Chiune wired the Foreign Ministry in Tokyo, explained the situation, and requested permission to issue the visas. His request was denied. The Ministry insisted that a Japanese visa be issued only if the refugee had a valid end visa and enough money to cover the cost of the entire trip. Chiune knew that most of the refugees could not meet either requirement. Over the next few days, he sent further requests to the Foreign Ministry for permission to issue the visas. Each request was met with silence. Realizing the urgency of the situation and unwilling to ignore his conscience, Chiune began to issue Japanese transit visas.

Chiune worked more than sixteen hours a day to issue 2,139 handwritten visas. He distributed them regardless of whether or not the refugees had the necessary supporting documents. In early September 1940, the Soviet authorities forced Chiune to close the consulate in Kovno. As he and his family prepared to leave Kovno for Berlin, he continued to issue visas on the train platform. He handed out more once he was on board.

The Germans invaded Lithuania in June 1941. There were more than 30,000 Jews still living in Kovno when the Soviet forces fled. In July, the *Einsatzgruppen* (mobile killing squads) and their Lithuanian auxiliaries began to massacre Jews in several forts around the city. The remaining Jews were herded into a ghetto, a section of the city where they were forced to live, and mass killings continued through the summer of 1944.

At the end of the war, the Soviets arrested Chiune Sugihara in Bucharest, Romania. They detained him and his family for more than a year in an internment camp in Romania, which had been part of the Axis alliance, and then for several months in Vladivostok, a seaport in far eastern Soviet territory. Upon his return to Japan, Chiune was forced to resign from the Foreign Service. The official reason for his dismissal was the downsizing of the diplomatic corps, but the real reason was likely the disobedience Chiune exhibited in helping the Jews of Kovno.

None of the refugees ever made it to Curaçao. From Japan, most went to Shanghai, China and others to the United States, Canada, and Palestine (now Israel). Since entire families were often included in a single visa, thousands of Jews survived due to the efforts of Chiune Sugihara.

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The Jewish Foundation for the Righteous provides financial support to Christians and Muslims who rescued Jews during the Holocaust and preserves their legacy through its national Holocaust education program.

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# Eugenia Wasowska

**Przemysl, Poland... Summer, 1941** – A year before Germany launched World War II, Sister Alfonsja became the director of an orphanage in Przemysl, Poland. She was nineteen years old. Born Eugenia Wasowska, she became a nun as a result of a vow her father had made when she was thirteen. The young girl was struck by a horse and buggy and seriously injured. Her father promised God that if his daughter lived, she would enter a convent. Eugenia recovered, and after finishing high school, she became a nun. She took the name Sister Alfonsja. Because of her love for children, she was assigned to a Catholic orphanage in Przemysl.

On the eve of the war, Przemysl, located in southeastern Poland, had a Jewish population of about 24,000. The Germans reached the town on September 14, 1939. Germany had agreed to divide conquered Polish territories with the Soviet Union, whose armies had advanced from the east. Przemysl straddled the dividing line, and came under full Soviet control on September 28, 1939, only to be reoccupied by the Germans on June 28, 1941. Under both Soviet and German rule, Jewish life in Przemysl deteriorated drastically. It was the Germans, however, who enacted anti-Jewish laws and who concentrated the Jews in a sealed ghetto, a section of the city where they were forced to live, isolating them from the non-Jewish population. Eventually, the Germans deported thousands of Jews from the ghetto to killing centers in Poland.

Sister Alfonsja became the director of the Catholic orphanage in Przemysl before the Germans and the Soviets invaded. Soon after the Germans reoccupied the area, she began to take in Jewish children. “Maria” was one of the first. One day Maria showed up at the

front door of the orphanage. When Sister Alfonsja opened the gate, Maria whispered through her tears, “My name is Maria. I am a Catholic. Please take care of me.” Sister Alfonsja noticed a young couple watching the girl from the edge of the woods near the orphanage. She immediately let her in. “Maria” was in fact Hedy Rosen, and the couple at the edge of the woods was her parents. Pretending to be Polish, Hedy’s mother found work as a washwoman in a nearby village. She would come to the orphanage in the middle of the night and leave food for the children by the gate.

Despite the danger and the daily struggle to manage, Sister Alfonsja took in thirteen Jewish children. There was never enough food or medicine, and she often had to beg for rations. The orphanage was unheated, and water had to be brought up from a well. Human waste was collected daily in buckets, which then had to be emptied.

In addition to providing shelter for the children, the orphanage saw to their schooling. Since Sister Alfonsja had pledged to take in only Catholic children, she had to keep the true identities of the Jewish children unknown to the priests who oversaw the local church. She treated the Jewish children as if they were Catholics. They attended mass along with the others and were taught that if a German asked them what they wanted to be when they grew up, they should say a nun or a priest.

In the spring of 1944, as the retreating Germans moved out of eastern Poland, Sister Alfonsja brought the thirteen Jewish children to the Jewish community in Przemysl, of which there were only 300 survivors. In 1950, she left the convent and returned to her original name, Eugenia Wasowska.

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