



Chiune Sugihara (left) during his visit to see Nobuki in Israel, December 1969

“He cried when he realised how many people had survived”

Rebecca Taylor speaks to Chiune Sugihara’s son about how he learned of his father’s mission to save refugees in Lithuania during the war

Nobuki Sugihara is a diamond trader who works at the epicentre of the industry in Antwerp, Belgium. Every day he is in contact with the Jewish Orthodox community, who dominate the Antwerp diamond business. But his life has been enmeshed with the life of Jews – even before he knew it. Nobuki, 71, is the son of Chiune Sugihara, the Japanese diplomat based in Kaunas, Lithuania during World War II who issued visas to 6,000 Jewish refugees (p27). But growing up, Nobuki knew nothing of his father’s actions.

REBECCA TAYLOR: When did you learn about what your father had done?

NOBUKI SUGIHARA: In 1968 we got a phone call from the Israeli Embassy in Tokyo asking my father if he could drop by as there was someone who wanted to meet him. The next day, my father took me with him to the embassy and we met with a Mr Nishri, one of the refugees my father had given a transit visa to in 1940 in Kaunas. During the meeting, both men spoke English and I understood very little. I read about it in the newspaper the next day. Before that he never talked about it.

RT: Have you met those he saved?

NS: The Israeli ambassador helped arrange a scholarship for me at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. My father came to visit me and we met an Israeli government minister, Zorach Warhaftig, and the deputy mayor of Tel Aviv, Zvi Klementinovski – both were saved by my father. Since then I have met many survivors.

RT: Why did he help the refugees?

NS: My father visited me in Jerusalem and I asked him why he had helped them. He said, ‘Because I took pity on them’. That was all. He was a quiet person.

RT: What is the reaction of Japanese people to what your father did?

NS: My father and the rest of the family were in prison camp in Romania under the Soviets and came back to Japan in 1947, when he was fired by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs – probably for going against government instructions. Until recently there was not much interest in Japan. Now his story is better known there and people are pleased to have a Japanese hero from that time because the Japanese don’t come

out well from that period of history. The best place to learn about my father is at his former high school in Nagoya, which has an exhibition about him.

RT: How has his legacy shaped your life?

NS: I studied in Jerusalem and worked in Tel Aviv and now Antwerp, so I have been surrounded by Israeli and Jewish people. I feel at home with them and regard Israel as my home.

RT: Did your father realise the impact of what he did?

NS: In 1985, the year before he died, a memorial grove was planted for him at Beit Shemesh in Israel. Thirty survivors attended the opening ceremony. I wrote to my father, who was bedridden at the time, about how people told me he was a gentleman to have written each visa by hand. My father cried while reading my letter. It was the first time he realised how many people had been saved. In September a beautiful Chiune Sugihara garden will be built in Jerusalem to remember him. ■

The Sempo Sugihara Memorial: pref.aichi.jp