



He defied the Tide of Time

Written and directed by Suzanne Concha Emmrich. 2012. 29 minutes. In Japanese, English, and German with English subtitles.

Study Areas: Japan, World War II, Japan-Europe Relations, Jewish refugees.



During the opening credits of *He defied the Tide of Time*, an unidentified voice explains, "I didn't care if I was fired. Anyone in that situation would have done the same." Although the words are simple, they represent an extreme situation that was anything but representative of how most individuals did act at the time. The words are those of Chiune Sugihara, a Japanese diplomat stationed in Lithuania during WWII, who saved over 6,000 Jews from the Holocaust by issuing much needed Japanese transit visas. While the number of Jewish refugees that Sugihara saved from certain death was considerable, his story is still not well known. *He defied the Tide of Time* attempts to change this oversight by shedding light on Sugihara's incredible story.

Skilled at learning languages, Chiune Sugihara worked for the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs at various international posts. Sugihara was also trained in espionage, which led him to the extreme situation alluded to in the film's opening scene. In 1939, Sugihara was responsible for opening a Japanese Consulate in the Lithuanian town of Kaunas. Opened under the auspices of assisting Japanese tourists and businessmen in the region, the consulate provided a means for Sugihara to gather intelligence about the Soviet Union and Germany on the eve of WWII. The clandestine information gathered by Sugihara allowed him to warn individuals—especially Jews—of the coming Nazi occupation in Lithuania.

Prior to the Nazi invasion of 1941, Jews in Lithuania with the means to do so sought

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> [New Reviews](#)

> [Reviews by Title](#)

> [Reviews by Author](#)

> [Reviews by Newsletter Issue](#)

[Website Reviews](#)

[Notes From the Classroom](#)

[Interviews](#)

refuge in places such as Brazil, Curaçao, Palestine and the US. However, they had to first secure transit visas to reach their final destinations through other countries. Hundreds—and then thousands—of Jews sought transit visas from Sugihara to travel through Japan. As a diplomat, Sugihara knew the risks that Jews could face in Nazi-occupied countries, but the film suggests he also knew that some travel documents presented by Jewish refugees were incomplete or fraudulent. One survivor interviewed in the film confirms that many Jews forged travel documents to facilitate their desperate flight from Lithuania. Appealing to the Japanese government for advice, Sugihara was told by the Ministry not to issue transit visas unless Jewish refugees could furnish entry permits from governments at the final point of debarkation. Making a conscious decision to disobey the Ministry's orders, Sugihara issued transit visas to any Jewish refugee who appealed to him. Although he feared for the safety of his family and was aware that the Nazi Gestapo was watching him, Sugihara issued thousands of transit visas in only a few weeks' time. Soon thereafter, the consulate was closed, and Sugihara had to leave Lithuania with his family. Witnesses recall that Sugihara even signed visas on the station platform as he boarded the train to leave. With the assistance of his wife, Yukiko, Sugihara saved over six thousand Jews. He remains the only Japanese individual ever named as a Righteous Amongst the Nations by Yad Vashem, the Israeli Holocaust remembrance authority.

After the war, Sugihara was not seen as a hero for his actions and he was dismissed from the Japanese Foreign Ministry. Sugihara's story was therefore relatively unknown. In fact, Sugihara's daughter-in-law explains in the film, "Lithuania was never a topic of conversation in our household." Much like the rest of Japan, Sugihara's grandchildren did not know what their grandfather did to save Jews during the war until recently.

Chiune Sugihara passed away in 1986, so his actions during WWII are explained in the film by those who witnessed the effects of his decisions, such as Japanese citizens and Holocaust survivors. Using archival footage of the war, contemporary interviews, photos of the Sugihara family, and clips of present day city life, the film highlights the impact of Sugihara's humanity in a time of extreme brutality. To accentuate the feeling of flight, the film uses vivid imagery of lives in motion, such as boats cutting across waves, birds flying, and trains chugging along railroad tracks. The film is therefore not only about the work of Sugihara, but the lives of individuals as they fled. The experiences of Japanese citizens who encountered Jewish refugees at various points of their journeys also give interesting insights into how war-induced migration can impact the lives of people across the globe.

The eyewitness accounts add ethnographic richness to the film and speak to the broader impact of Sugihara's actions, but the viewer must pay close attention to keep up with the changing context of each interview. The minor drawback of the film is that the variety of stories can make the historical details difficult to ascertain at times. Those already familiar with the timeline of WWII will find it easier to contextualize the witness discussions. The film also seems challenged by how to bring in Sugihara as a character and not just a topic of study. The director made the decision to include Sugihara's experiences through voiceover readings from his personal papers. While Sugihara's words are eloquent and moving, one should be aware that Sugihara's experiences often appear unannounced and unexplained as first-person narratives.

Ultimately, the story of Chiune Sugihara is inspirational, but questions remain as to whether the film is intended to be the story of Sugihara's life, the refugees he saved, or the individuals who were unknowingly witnessed a piece of history. Admittedly, trying to capture an international refugee migration story during a war is complicated, so these drawbacks can be easily overlooked. Overall, *He defied the Tide of Time* is a much needed film that highlights a little-known tale of wartime courage. This film would be of interest to a general audience, as well as those interested in Japanese war history or Holocaust stories.

Christine Beresniova is a Takiff Foundation Fellow at Jack, Joseph, and Morton Mandel Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

Distributor contact information for *He defied the Tide of Time* is available through the [AEMS film database](#).

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