

Japan That Helped the Jewish Refugees

By Uesugi Chitoshi
(Summary)

I was devoting myself to the examination of history textbooks when I encountered a high-school text called “New English Course” (*Sanyûsha*), which came into use in April of 1994. One passage introduced the account of Sugihara Chiune, a Japanese vice-consul in Kaunas, Lithuania, who issued some 2,000 visas to save about 6,000 Jewish refugees in the summer of 1940. I learned about this mentioning of Sugihara in the textbook from media reports.

I felt that there was something unclear in understanding the textbook account. Since Sugihara and I were from the same prefecture, I set out to investigate the circumstances of the issuance of those visas.

As a result, I found that Sugihara had not been the only person helping Jewish refugees. At the outbreak of the Sino–Japanese Incident in June of 1937, when Japan couldn’t avoid getting involved in the problem of the Jewish refugees, the examples of high-ranking military officers like Maj. Gen. Higuchi Kiichirô, Col. Yasue Norihiro, and naval Capt. Inuzuka Koreshige, served to demonstrate the proactive stance of the Japanese armed forces to deal compassionately with Jewish refugees.

Thanks to those connected with these four men, biographical and historical records exist documenting their actions. Since no general accounts of these men’s actions, it is difficult to know the full story.

From my research, I came to realize that these four men’s personal stories and their admirable actions — like that of Capt. Inuzuka, who carried out a difficult task in Shanghai — have been completely misunderstood.

I was able to write *Yudaya Nanmin to Hakkô Itchô* (Jewish Refugees and Universal Brotherhood* — published on Feb. 11, 2002 by Tentensha) using documents of the Diplomatic Record Office of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as the nucleus, supported by exchanges of shared information and materials provided by Maj. Gen. (later Lt. Gen.) Higuchi’s eldest daughter, Tamamura Michiko (born 12/18/1917); the husband of his third daughter Hashimoto Fujiko (b. 7/13/1929), Hashimoto Yoshikata; his fourth daughter, Satô Chieko (b. 9/3/1933); Col. Yasue’s eldest son, Yasue Hiroo (b. 7/6/1924); and Capt. Inuzuka’s eldest son, Inuzuka Masataka (b. 12/15/1932).

Inuzuka Masakata (a graduate of the Department of Letters of Tokyo Kyôiku University in English Literature, formerly an English teacher at a

* The phrase “*hakkô itchô*” has been variously translated as “the eight corners of the world under one roof,” “Universal Brotherhood,” etc. Since “Universal Brotherhood” was the official translation used during the Tokyo Tribunals, we have adopted that usage here.

public high school in Shizuoka prefecture) took on the task of translating this book into English. The title of the English edition has been changed to *The Japan That Helped The Jewish Refugees*.

With this English publication, the book can be widely read in Europe, America, and Israel.

Yudaya Nanmin to Hakkô Itchô is not a book for the masses; its writing style is formal and essay-like, and not even easy to read in Japanese. Now, however, with publication in English, it is all the more accessible.

There are a few points that need to be noted about the actions of these four people.

A. “The Higuchi–Matsuoka Route”: Rescuing the Jewish Refugees

With the outbreak of the Sino–Japanese Incident, the Japanese Central Army grew concerned about Soviet activities, so Maj. Gen. Higuchi, recalled from Berlin, served as military attaché at the Japanese embassy. He was assigned as chief of the Special Service Agency at Harbin in Manchuria (the three former north-east provinces of China).

At that time, Dr. A. Kaufmann, leader of the Jewish community in Harbin, was planning a Far-East Asian Jewish Conference. There was concern when Gen. Higuchi arrived at his post, but he reassured them when he approved their holding of the conference.

The army’s central department, which were aware of these activities through the Kwantung Army, sent the army’s number-one expert on Jewish studies — Col. Yasue Norihiro, who had been a student at the military academy at the same time as Higuchi — to assist him.

The First Far-East Asian Jewish Conference opened in Harbin on Dec. 26, 1937 and lasted for three days. It was a success. This paved the way for the Second Conference to be held in December of 1938, and the Third in December of 1939.

On March 8, 1938, news arrived of Jewish refugees arriving at Otopol Station in the Soviet Union. Higuchi advised Japanese diplomat Shimomura Nobusada in Harbin, Manchuria, to help them gain passage. Thereafter, Shimomura telephoned the director of the South Manchurian Railroad, Matsuoka Yôsuke (later Japan’s Minister of Foreign Affairs), and asked him to arrange transportation.

Matsuoka issued directions to give free passage to the refugees. Thereafter, free passage to the refugees was made a standing policy.

Because of the resolute actions of Higuchi and Matsuoka, many Jewish refugees were admitted to Harbin and Dalian, and then went on to America or Shanghai. I call this the Higuchi–Matsuoka Route.

Nazi Germany issued a protest over the Otopol Incident, but the chief-of-staff of the Kwantung Army, Lt. Gen. (later Prime Minister) Tôjô Hideki, was in agreement with Gen. Higuchi, so he ignored it. When he wrote his memoirs after the war, Higuchi praised Tôjô’s stance highly.

B. “The Yasue-Itagaki Line”: A National Policy to Protect the Jewish Refugees.

Col. Yasue, after having the opportunity to participate in the First Far-East Asian Jewish Conference, took an active role in dealing with the Jewish refugee problem while attached to the Kwantung Army.

Yasue’s idea was to add the Jews to the Manchurian national policy, rather than the “Peaceful Cooperation Among the Five Peoples,” to make it “Peaceful Cooperation Among the *Six Peoples.*” On Jan. 21, 1938, he had the Kwantung Army headquarters declare “An Outline on the Policy Vis-à-vis the Jewish People Henceforth.”

This was meant to include the Jewish people in the stated goal to “make [our] ideal to gather in the embrace of our great spirit of Universal Brotherhood.”

There were those in economic circles that hoped to use Jewish capital in the development of Manchuria. In opposition to this, he stated, “We must strictly stave off attitudes like arbitrarily making investments with Jewish capital.”

Then, in July of 1938, delegates from 32 nations met at an international conference in Evian, France and issued a flat rebuff to the question of accepting Jewish refugees. With this, a large influx of refugees was anticipated only to countries in the Japanese sphere of influence. On Oct. 3, 1938, Japan decided that “[they] are not wanted in Japan or any of our colonies (but they may pass through them).”

Yasue, in opposition to this policy of the Foreign Affairs Office, sent a petition to the Minister of the Army, Lt. Gen. (later Gen.) Itagaki Seishirô, with a letter of introduction from Maj. Gen. (later Lt. Gen.) Ishihara Kanji, the deputy chief of staff of the Kwantung Army, who had been a classmate at the military academy. As a result, at the prompting of the Minister of the Army, key ministers of state (called a “Conference of Five Ministers”) met on Dec. 6, 1938, and together decided on a “Policy Prospectus Vis-à-vis the Jews.”

The policy stated: “Now, for Jewish people coming legally into Japan, Manchuria, or China, conventional regulations for foreign immigrants are dispensed with.” The protection of Jewish refugees had become a state policy.

In its preamble, it stated “[We are] in agreement with the time-honored assertion of the spirit of equality for all people” — a distinct rejection of the anti-Semitic policy of Japan’s ally, Nazi Germany.

In this fashion, protection of Jewish refugees was made a Japanese national policy thanks to the “Yasue–Itagaki Line.”

C. “Paradise” — The Jewish Refugee Community in Shanghai and the Inuzuka Machine

With the Sino–Japanese Incident, the Jewish quarter of Shanghai

became one of the districts that came under the protection of the Japanese navy. The Japanese navy's number one expert on Jewish studies was Capt. Inuzuka Koreshige, who served at Naval Headquarters. After suggesting setting up the conference in Shanghai to discuss the formation of policy with respect of what to do with the Jews, he felt it had become necessary for him to remain full-time in Shanghai, so in April of 1939, the "Inuzuka Machine" was born.

He had heard unofficial word of a promotion to rear admiral and an assignment to sea duty, but instead, he requested a transfer to the reserves and an assignment with the navy in Shanghai so that he could function from time to time as the head of the Inuzuka Machine.

Anti-Semitic sentiment was spreading in Japan since the time Japanese troops were sent into Siberia during {the Russo-Japanese War}. When one faction connected with the army in Shanghai issued an opinion piece suggesting the Jews be deported, Inuzuka issued an article on March 19, 1939 countering that position. In it, he said, "These refugees are German citizens and in a third [i.e., someone else's] country. Where might the authority to deport them be under international law?" With this, he quashed the talk of deportation.

The unrestricted influx of refugees was causing problems for the Shanghai Jewish community and Shanghai's department of works. A request was made to Inuzuka to enlist the Japanese government's help in stopping the incoming flow of refugees.

Instead, he found himself in a difficult position, unable to stave the refugee influx and still having to do whatever he could for them. Among the refugees arriving in Kobe were those who knew nothing of these circumstances, yet thought Inuzuka was in agreement with the Nazi's diabolical "Final Solution to the Jewish Question."

In fact, on June 10, 1939, Inuzuka allowed the investigation section of "Manchurian Rail" to publish his report declaring that *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* was the greatest literary hoax of the century. The beliefs of those in favor of stopping the influx of refugees to Shanghai were therefore based on a spectacular misconception.

Inuzuka returned to his original position upon the outbreak of the Greater East Asia War. On Dec. 30, 1941, the Shanghai Naval Office Special Investigative Unit was established and he became its head. The unit's purpose was to investigate the Sassoon financial empire and conduct counter-espionage.

One of their jobs, which must be noted here, was to investigate the relationship between the Jews and the Freemasons, for which they entered a Jewish temple to bring light onto the subject. According to their report, "An Outline of the Investigation of the Freemasons," the Nazi propaganda claiming that Freemasons were a group secretly controlled by Jews was false.

At about this time, a false story, in the employ of the army and others,

accusing Inuzuka of misappropriation of funds from the Sassoon financial empire began to be spread by anti-Semitic factions. The naval authorities were unable to cope with this complication, so Inuzuka was ordered to sea. When he shipped off on March 7, 1942, he was seen off by an assemblage of notable Jewish personages.

Capt. Inuzuka had turned down a promotion and volunteered to work in Shanghai to solve the complicated problem of the Jewish refugees. In 1991, Hilda Rabau, a poet who lived Shanghai during that time, wrote a poem called “Shanghai Was Paradise.”

D. “Visas of Life” — Sugihara Issued Visas Interpreting Instructions from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs by extension and was Awarded the Order of the Sacred Treasure, Fifth Class.

Sugihara Chiune took up his post as vice-consul in Kaunas, Lithuania, with the establishment of the consulate there in August of 1939. His duty was to collect international information.

Early on July 18, 1940, many Jewish refugees appeared at the consulate seeking visas. Because of this, Sugihara sent the Ministry of Foreign Affairs a telegram, and they responded. The specifics of the exchange was published on March 30, 1996, by Shiraishi Masaaki of the Ministry Archives in “Introducing Documents: On Records Regarding the Issuance of the So-called Visas of Life” (*Reports of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archive*, vol. 8).

According to the article, the core of his instructions was to issue visas to those who “carry suitable [amounts] of money for travel expenses as well as for their stay in-country, after completing procedures for them to go on to their destination country.” There was nothing in them to say that he was to be particularly strict just because they were Jewish refugees.

If he had followed the directives, he would not have been able to issue any visas, however. Therefore, from July 29 to Aug. 26 he rubber-stamped a large number of visas for the Dutch-held island of Curaçao. The total number of visas issued was 2,139. These were family visas, though, and if we take each visa to cover three people, this means a total of some 6,000 people.

The Jewish refugees went by ship from Vladivostok to Tsuruga and were welcomed in by the Jewish community in Kobe. Thereafter, they sailed on to America or Australia, or went to Shanghai.

He issued these “visas of life” in full readiness to resign his position; but the powers that be of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs — Minister Matsuoka Yôsuke and Deputy Minister Ôhashi Chûichi — did not penalize him whatsoever. With the signing of the Tripartite Agreement on Sept. 27, 1940, there was concern among the Jews living in Tokyo. To Jikkman, who had been introduced to him by Capt. Yasue, Minister Matsuoka said that, “Though I was responsible for the alliance with Hitler, I said nothing about carrying out anti-Semitic activities in Japan. This is not a personal opinion; it

is also the opinion of the Japanese government.” Moreover, Ôhashi was from Gifu Prefecture, as was Sugihara, and both had worked as diplomats with Manchurian Rail, and Ôhashi had the highest regard for Sugihara, who exhibited supreme skill during the problematic purchase of the Manchurian Rail line from the Soviet Union.

Thus, Sugihara continued to work as a diplomat in Europe, and on Nov. 15, 1944, he was awarded the Order of the Sacred Treasure, fifth-class.

He returned to Japan after the war in 1947. On June 7, he resigned from the foreign service. This was due to the Administrative Reorganization and Special Staffing Order of 1946, calling for a shake-up in personnel, and had nothing whatsoever to do with his issuance of the “visas of life.”

The Jewish community holds in high regard the afore-mentioned people who helped Jewish refugees. The “Golden Book” (as it is commonly known in Japan) is a registry of names that are held in regard by Israel. On June 14, 1941, Maj. Gen. Higuchi’s name was entered in volume six as number 4026, and entry number 4028 was Col. Yasue’s. Capt. Inuzuka declined the honor, saying, “I was only working in accordance with the Emperor’s benevolence toward all people.” On Jan. 18, 1985, Vice-consul Sugihara was awarded the status of “Righteous Among the Nations” by the government of Israel.

There are, however, few who know the humane acts of Itagaki Shôshirô. As Minister of the Army, he set forth the “Policy Prospectus Vis-à-vis the Jews” on Dec. 6, 1938. Given the global perspective at the time, it was a most meritorious deed. I would like to advocate making December 6 “Humanity Day.”

The establishment of the “Higuchi-Matsuoka Route” was made possible through the appropriate decision of Lt. Gen. Tôjô Hideki, chief-of-staff of the Kwantung Army. Furthermore, Matsuoka Yôsuke not only helped with the passage of the Jewish refugees as chairman of the South Manchurian Railroad — as the Minister of Foreign Affairs, he did not punish Vice-consul Sugihara for, technically, disobeying his directives. Furthermore, even though he entered Japan into an alliance with Nazi Germany, his own declaration to the Jewish community marked it clear that he didn’t agree with Hitler’s anti-Semitic policies. The words and deeds of such persons are highly deserving of praise.

After the war, there were probably many in Japan who could not understand how these people could have adopted such a pro-Jewish view while the prevailing attitude was anti-Jewish. I doubt that today, even Jews or the rest of the world fully understand either.

At the time, the Japanese thought that the Jews were a threat to Japan, thanks to the anti-Semitic propaganda picked up from White Russians during the First World War — propaganda relating to the emergence of Communism in Russia and the machinations of Jews in Europe.

Out of this concern, Yasue and Inuzuka took up Jewish studies, becoming the army and navy's top experts on the subject. This is why they became directly responsible for the Jews — Yasue in Manchuria, and Inuzuka in Shanghai.

It wasn't just these two, however. Many people of the time (especially military personnel) thought of the words of the founding emperor, Jinmu, after creating the state of Japan: "Universal Brotherhood." This overriding principle was behind all thought and conduct.

This is why, when dealing with the Jews, who were in crisis at the time, it was only natural that the Japanese did so according to the principle of "Universal Brotherhood," rather than be concerned about the "Jewish peril." Sugihara was probably thinking about this when he said, "As I was confronted by these wailing Jewish refugees, what I thought was, 'what would His Majesty do if he were here?' When I thought that, the conclusion was obvious. I had to do what I thought His Majesty would have done."

On Dec. 15, 1945, the American Army, occupying Japan at the time, ordered the exclusion of the phrase "Universal Brotherhood" as a government slogan as one part of the "Shinto Directive," to tear down the Japanese spirit. At the Tokyo Tribunal (AKA Far-East Military Tribunal), however, the incarcerated former Prime Minister Hiranuma Kiichirô and former Army Minister Araki Sadao, made a petition, pleading through attorney Kiyose Ichirô and others that "Universal Brotherhood" was a moral objective — a principle expressing the universality of man — and nothing more. The phrase had nothing to do with any expression of aggression.

As an ally of Nazi Germany, Japan cooperated militarily and diplomatically, but definitely not with the German policy of anti-Semitism. The Japanese firmly believed, and acted on, the spirit behind the ideal of the founding of the Japanese state of "Universal Brotherhood" — that is, the acceptance of the Imperial will and acting in accord with it was the active principal of the Japanese people.