

Ho Fengshan. Source: *The Righteous Among the Nations* website at <http://tinyurl.com/pkg9cc3>.

Sugihara Chiune. Source: *The Righteous Among the Nations* website at <http://tinyurl.com/oy7dlcj>.

A Tale of Two Diplomats

Ho Fengshan, Sugihara Chiune, and Jewish Efforts to Flee Nazi Europe

By David B. Gordon



This year marks the seventieth anniversary of the end of World War II, a cataclysm that continues to shape Asia and the world. Horrific even within this conflict, the Nazi Holocaust featured the German government's murder of some six million Europeans defined as racially Jewish. At first glance, it may seem far removed from the bitter struggle between the Republic of China (ROC) and Japan that simultaneously dominated East Asia. Yet there are numerous links at the level of government policies and, especially, in the person of two courageous diplomats, Ho Fengshan (the family name is pronounced like "huh") and Sugihara Chiune.² The Nazi persecution of Jews was not hermetically sealed from Asian circumstances; rather, Asian responses to that persecution can help educators highlight the global character of this truly *world war*.

Austrian Jews and Ho Fengshan

When Germany's Nazi Party came to power in early 1933, it swiftly acted on its harsh rhetoric toward Jews, whom it blamed for Germany's many problems. Among other actions, it systematically deprived Jews of the benefits of German citizenship through the Nuremberg Laws of 1935. Consequently, when Germany annexed Austria in March 1938, it quickly enforced the entire system of restrictions on Jews that it had developed over the preceding five years. In Vienna, Austria's capital, members of the Jewish community faced physical harassment at work, school, home, and numerous public settings. *Kristallnacht*—November 9–10, 1938—marked a culmination of these trends, as mobs throughout Greater Germany (i.e., Germany and Austria) launched attacks on Jewish synagogues and businesses that produced burning buildings and plenty of broken glass. Fittingly, *Kristallnacht* also formed the backdrop for the bold activities of the Consul General of the Chinese Consulate in Vienna, Ho Fengshan.

Ho Fengshan had grown up in China's Hunan Province, where his parents' early deaths led his relatives to entrust his upbringing to a Norwegian Lutheran mission in Yiyang. Ho early displayed a facility for Western languages that enabled him to enter Yale-in-China College in Changsha and, later, the University of Munich, where he earned a PhD in political economics in 1932. Soon afterward, he entered China's Foreign Ministry, beginning his first overseas posting in Ankara, Turkey, in 1935. He arrived in Vienna for his second posting in 1937, when Austria was still independent. However, following Germany's annexation, the city's embassies became consulates under the jurisdiction of their respective embassies in Berlin. Accordingly, Ho became Consul General at a sensitive point in the histories of both Europe and Asia.

The Asian side of this history directly affected Ho. In July 1937, Japan invaded China, prompting fierce fighting between the two countries in Shanghai and elsewhere. For its part, China had aligned itself with Germany since before Hitler's rise to power. Chiang Kaishek, the country's leader, was especially eager to obtain German weapons and training for his military. Nevertheless, the Chinese troops Germans had trained lost in Shanghai, leading Hitler to reassess the alliance. In early 1938, he

*My father's greatest legacy
was to be who he was.*

—Manli Ho,
daughter of Ho Fengshan

*How do we become like
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growth and education of lots
of little Sugiharas?*

—Hillel Levine¹



German military police marching into Austria, March 12, 1938. Source: *World War II Database* at <http://tinyurl.com/njx8yc2>.



Typical scene in Jewish neighborhoods in Germany and Austria on *Kristallnacht*, November 9, 1938. Source: *Thinglink* website at <http://tinyurl.com/nhesywe>.



Kristallnacht—broken windows of a Jewish shop in Berlin. Source: <http://tinyurl.com/n9wgktw>.

began shifting his support to Japan, which, like China, possessed an authoritarian, anti-Communist regime and seemed more capable than China of helping Germany surround the Soviet Union (USSR). This, in turn, panicked the ROC government, prompting it to send Vice Foreign Minister Chen Jie to Berlin to serve as ambassador and restore the Sino-German relationship.

Despite its anxieties, the Chinese government continued to permit very limited Jewish migration from Europe. It also mulled the possibility of creating a special Jewish settlement in southwest China, with rival plans promoted by figures linked to departed ROC leader Sun Yatsen. These plans disappeared when anticipated US assistance failed to materialize.

Back in Europe, Ho witnessed the deteriorating situation of Jews in Vienna. For example, on the day of Kristallnacht, he visited the Rosenbergs, a couple whom his consulate had provided with visas. When a pair of Nazi plainclothesmen entered their house, they saw Ho and demanded that he identify himself. He refused, insisting that they identify themselves instead, prompting one of them to aim a gun at him. Although he stood firm and the Nazis withdrew, the Rosenbergs emigrated immediately afterward.

Visas, Visas, Visas

As this episode suggests, Ho made his foremost contribution to the safety of Austrian Jews by having his office issue them visas. In the 1930s, passport visas came in three main varieties: exit, transit, and entry. An exit visa enabled a person to leave a country (such as Nazi Germany or the USSR) that strictly controlled its own population. A transit visa permitted the person to pass through a country rapidly en route to another that would serve as his or her destination. An entry visa, in turn, provided its recipient with that destination. Ho's visas were entry visas for Shanghai—a city that, by 1938, his government no longer controlled!

Jurisdiction in the Shanghai metropolis had long been complex. The ROC had governed the majority of the city until 1937; however, Japan conquered the Chinese-controlled areas in that year. Consequently, the city now lacked passport controls, meaning that in practice anyone who reached the city could enter it. Nevertheless, anyone purchasing ship tickets back in Austria still had to prove that they possessed an entry visa for their ship's destination. Several thousand Austrian Jewish refugees did utilize their Shanghai visas to travel to the city. For many others, however, the main importance of a Shanghai visa was that it helped them leave Austria and seek the permissions they needed to reach other, usually Western, destinations.

In his autobiography written decades later, Ho states, "I worked secretly with several American religious and charity organizations, and I did whatever I could to help them [i.e., Austrian Jews], but I do not know how many were saved."³ Ho's stance, based on a liberal reading of the ROC's visa policy, clashed with that of his superior, Ambassador Chen Jie, who held that assisting Jews would anger the Nazis. Chen ordered Ho by telephone to stop issuing visas and await new instructions from the Foreign Ministry. When no instructions emerged, Ho told his office to resume issuing the visas. Chen next sent an underling to ascertain whether Ho was selling visas for profit, though no evidence turned up for this. Nevertheless, Ho received a demerit in his diplomatic record in 1939, evidently over the visa issue. Significantly, the next Chinese Consul General in Vienna, taking charge in 1940, pointedly kept the number of visas for Jewish refugees to a bare minimum.

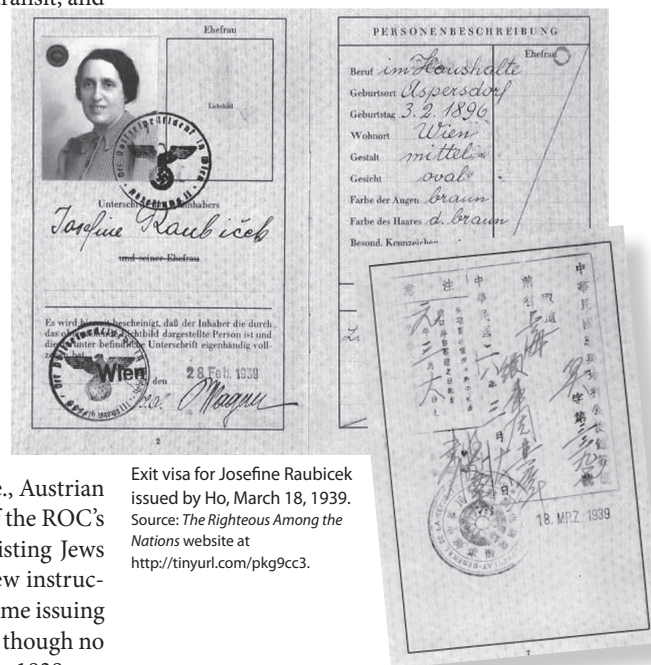
Ho's efforts were essential during a period of "panic emigration" out of Greater Germany, when consulates were tightening their restrictions on all visas for refugees. Indeed, during 1938–1939, an estimated 16,000 Jewish refugees from Greater Germany reached Shanghai, rendering it one of their leading destinations. The serial numbers on Shanghai visas suggest that Ho may have been responsible for issuing several hundred visas a month, so if even a mere fraction of these were actually used, his contribution was substantial. Following World War II, Ho went on to pursue a distinguished diplomatic career serving the ROC in Egypt, Mexico, and elsewhere. Four years after his death in 1997, Israel's Yad Vashem—the official memorial to Holocaust victims—honored him with its Righteous Among the Nations Award. Regarding his motivations toward the refugees, Ho later stated, "I thought it only natural to feel compassion and to want to help. From the standpoint of humanity, that is the way it should be."⁴

Nazi Germany and Japan

As we have seen, the Japanese government was moving toward a closer relationship with Nazi Germany, one that would culminate in the Tripartite Pact that Japan, Germany, and Italy signed on September 27, 1940. The budding alliance did not mean that the Japanese government fully shared the Nazis' views of Jews, however. In December 1938, the month after Kristallnacht, the



Screen capture of Ho Fengshan at his typewriter from the Holocaust Museum Houston video honoring Ho Fengshan's receipt of the 2015 Lyndon Baines Johnson Moral Courage Award. Source: YouTube at <http://tinyurl.com/p8lvaao>.



Exit visa for Josefina Raubicek issued by Ho, March 18, 1939. Source: *The Righteous Among the Nations* website at <http://tinyurl.com/pkg9cc3>.



After German annexation of Austria, Austrian Jewish refugees disembark from the Italian steamship *Conte Verde*. Shanghai, China, December 14, 1938. Source: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, *Holocaust Encyclopedia* at <http://tinyurl.com/pdon66x>.



The Japanese Embassy in Berlin, clad in the banners of the three signatories of the Tripartite Pact in September 1940. Source: Bundesarchiv Bild 183-L09218, Berlin, Japanische Botschaft by Bundesarchiv, Wikimedia Commons at <http://tinyurl.com/pfnbye8>.

Japanese Five Ministers' Conference discussed how Japan's diplomatic offices should respond to the increasing appeals of European Jewish refugees for visas. It decided that they should treat Jewish applicants as they did other foreigners—meaning that they would discourage them from immigrating. However, they would favorably consider applications from wealthy, talented Jews, as the conference evidently hoped to impress the American Jewish community, which some Japanese officials viewed as having great influence over the US government. This policy continued until early 1942, when Japan's bombing of Pearl Harbor eliminated all prospect of influencing the United States.

Like the Chinese government, then, the Japanese government hoped in some way to please both Nazi Germany, who it admired for their economic and military successes, and the Jewish people, which it admired for its alleged financial savvy and political influence. The practical result was that Jews could continue to enter Shanghai freely until August 1939, when the Japanese government imposed restrictions in response to Japanese residents' fears of economic competition.

Sugihara Chiune and Lithuania

It was in this national context—movement toward an alliance with Nazi Germany, combined with ambivalent signals toward Jewish refugees—that Sugihara Chiune became the acting Consul of the Japanese Consulate in Kaunas, Lithuania, in October 1939; the city was commonly called by its Slavic name, Kovno, before 1940. Sugihara's own background, in turn, suggests the independent streak that he displayed later in unilaterally issuing thousands of visas to Polish Jewish refugees. Born on the first day of the twentieth century, he grew up as the son of a small-town tax collector who shifted to innkeeping in colonial Korea. Following a brief stint at the prestigious Waseda University, he passed a Foreign Ministry exam and began to study Russian at Harbin Gakuin

in Manchuria. Over several years, his photographic memory enabled him to master the language to virtually a native speaker level. After graduating, he worked for various government agencies that sought to exploit his Russian skills. He also married a Russian and, in the early 1930s, rose within Manchukuo's Foreign Ministry to the level of Vice Foreign Minister. Nevertheless, in the mid-1930s, he divorced, left Manchukuo, remarried, and began the foreign service career that led him to Lithuania.

Sugihara's first posting was to Helsinki, Finland. While stationed there, a seemingly unthinkable development occurred: in August 1939, Nazi Germany signed a nonaggression pact with the USSR that secretly split Poland between the two powers. On the surface at least, the fiercely anti-Communist Nazi government had befriended the world's only Communist country! Among other provisions, the agreement gave the USSR control over two of the three Baltic states while leaving the third—Lithuania—independent. It was all baffling to outsiders.



Sugihara in Harbin Gakuin, Manchuria. Source: NPO Chiune Sugihara Visas for Life website at <http://tinyurl.com/ppmbgwu>.



Joseph Stalin, Joachim von Ribbentrop, and others at the signing of the German-Soviet Boundary and Friendship Treaty. Source: Bundesarchiv Bild 183-H27343, Dtsch.-Sowjet. Grenz- u. Freundschaftsvertrag, Wikimedia Commons at <http://tinyurl.com/pxb26qr>.

Japanese officials learned from their German counterparts that they saw the pact as temporary. Nevertheless, Hitler was not indicating when he might attack Russia—vital information for a Japan that still sought to encircle the USSR. In this context, the Japanese government sent Sugihara to Lithuania to open its first-ever consulate there in order to determine the probable timing of the upcoming German attack.

Sugihara's role was to spy for evidence of German military preparations. By the time his consulate opened, Germany had already invaded western Poland. Accordingly, Sugihara developed links with the anti-Nazi Polish underground, arranging to provide its operatives with Japanese diplomatic passports, couriers, and transportation that could help them relay information to the Polish government-in-exile in London. In return, the partisans gave him information about German troop movements in the region.

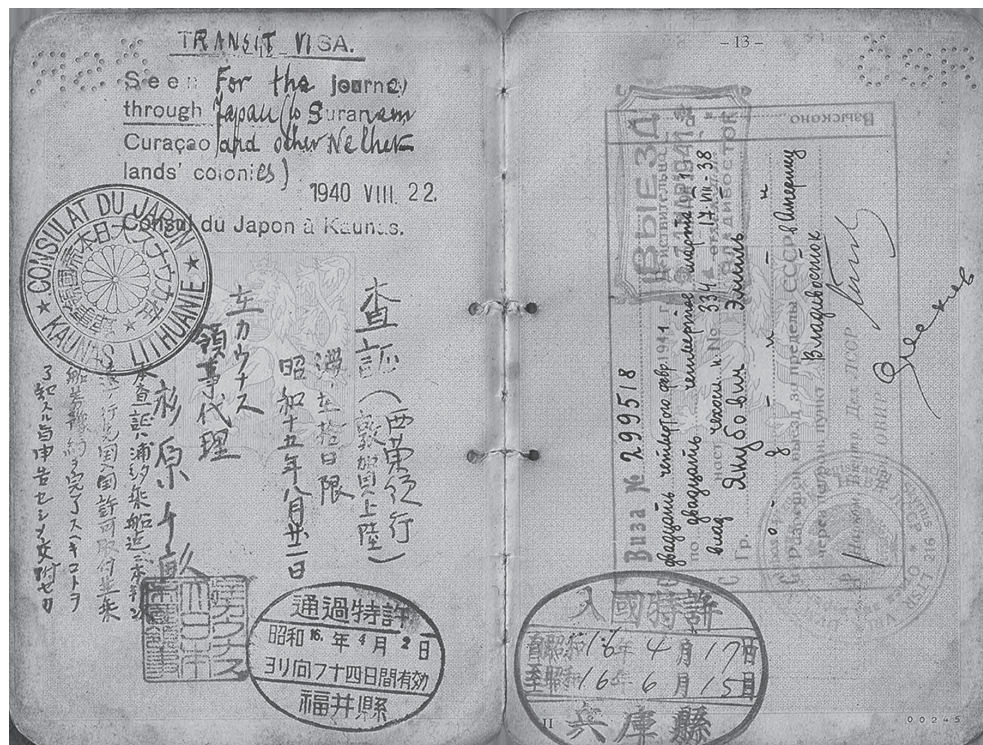
During the same period, Sugihara also began to make contact with Lithuanian Jews. These included Boris Minkowitz, the son of an international flax dealer in Vilnius, and Solly Ganor, a ten-year-old boy who audaciously invited Sugihara to his uncle's Hanukkah party in Kaunas. Sugihara and his family attended the party and were struck by the stories they heard there about Nazi anti-Jewish persecution in Poland.

In spring 1940, Lithuania came across as an island of hope in an Eastern Europe otherwise dominated by Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia. This changed drastically on June 15, 1940, when the USSR invaded the country and rapidly transformed it into a Soviet province. Added to this, in the previous month, Germany had invaded

the Netherlands, with the result that the nation's foreign consulates came to be staffed by a newly established Dutch government-in-exile. This would prove critical for Sugihara and several thousand Polish Jews.

The Curaçao "Visa"

Curaçao is an island in the southern Caribbean Sea, north of the Venezuelan coast and controlled by the Dutch during World War II. The origins of the Curaçao "visa" are obscure, although the idea seems to have sprung from the mind of a desperate refugee.⁵ In any case, the concept was ingenious.



A Curaçao visa with Sugihara's "transit visa" stamps. Source: Wikimedia Commons at <http://tinyurl.com/pl26og3>.

Usually someone traveling to Curaçao had a statement stamped in their passport that read, "For Curaçao, no visa is required. Only the local Governor has the authority to issue landing permits."⁶ In actuality, the governor rarely issued such permits. If the sentence about the governor was omitted, however, the simple declaration that "no visa is required" effectually provided its bearer with a genuine port of entry.

The new Dutch Consul General in Kaunas, Jan Zwartendijk, employed this legal fiction to justify his issuance of over 2,000 "visas" in the summer of 1940 to Jewish refugees trying to leave Lithuania. In fact, the aim was not actual travel to Curaçao, but rather the possession of an "entry visa" that could simplify the acquisition of other visas. In this respect, Zwartendijk's compassionate actions resemble those of Ho Fengshan.

In the case of the Curaçao "entry visa," what was needed to complete a supposed path to Curaçao was a transit visa from Japan and an exit visa from the USSR. These could have been insuperable obstacles, as Japan discouraged foreign arrivals and the USSR usually viewed emigration as treasonous. In the summer of 1940, however, high-placed officials made decisions that cleared a pathway.

One of those officials was Sugihara. He cabled authorities in Tokyo to ask whether he could issue visas to Polish Jewish refugees massed outside his consulate. He was told that they had to fulfill all the government's documentary requirements and possess enough money not to require assistance in Japan. Sugihara pressed his government for greater leniency but found little. In response, he began to issue transit visas to the waiting crowd.

At first, he observed legal niceties such as charging a fee and checking that each applicant possessed their Curaçao "visa." As he sped up his work, however, he began paying less attention to these rules. To assist him, his Polish underground friends made a stamp so that he would not have to write



The building that served as Sugihara's consulate and home in Kaunas. His wife, Yukiko, and her sister Setuko are on the front porch. Source: NPO Chiune Sugihara Visas for Life website at <http://tinyurl.com/nn8c366>.



Sugihara and Yukiko at the consulate in Kaunas. Source: KPBS Sugihara web page at <http://tinyurl.com/q2wreq2>.



Jewish refugees waiting for visas in front of Sugihara's consulate/home in Kaunas, Lithuania.

Source: Screen capture from Sugihara: The Conspiracy of Kindness, a six-part History Channel video series at <http://tinyurl.com/o4te4eo>.



The Jewish refugees with Sugihara visas traveled by train from Kaunas, Lithuania, to Moscow, then on to Vladivostok via the Trans-Siberian Railway. In Vladivostok, they went by ship to the Japanese port city of Tsuruga, then on to Kobe—the home of a well-established Jewish community. Map illustration by Willa Davis.

out entire visas by hand. This proved especially helpful when he issued visas to a *yeshiva*—a school of Orthodox Jewish learning—composed of some three hundred students and faculty.

As Sugihara's work dragged into August, the Soviet government pressured him to close his consulate in line with Lithuania's new provincial status. Sugihara stalled as best he could, pleading in his fluent Russian for extensions. He continued issuing visas at the consulate until September 4, 1940, at which point he moved his family into a local hotel. He still issued visas in the lobby of the hotel and, it is said, even at the station where he boarded a train for Berlin. In February 1941, he submitted to the Japanese Foreign Ministry a list of 2,139 visas he had issued—a list that was almost certainly incomplete, inasmuch as he eventually stopped keeping records in order to focus on issuing visas more quickly.

After Kaunas

To leave Lithuania, refugees receiving a Sugihara visa would have to travel through the USSR to Vladivostok, board a steamer for Japan, and take a train to the port city of Kobe, where a small Jewish community resided. The only feasible way to cross the USSR was to board the Trans-Siberian Railway for a 6,000-mile journey. How could impoverished refugees afford this? And why did the USSR—then in a particularly brutal Stalinist phase—let them traverse the country?

The USSR clearly sought foreign currency, working out a deal with the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee whereby Jewish sources would pay some US \$200 (several times the usual fare) for each train ticket across Russia. It also appears from the willingness of Soviet authorities in Lithuania to assist Polish Jewish refugees that they were happy to see this restive foreign population leave. In contrast, the Soviets regarded Lithuanian Jews as Soviet citizens and insisted that they stay—which proved fatal once Germany invaded the USSR in June 1941.

How did Sugihara's visa recipients fare? Hundreds began to reach Vladivostok near the end of 1940, at which point they proceeded to Japan. Once there, they could have their transit visas extended repeatedly as they searched for countries that would accept them as immigrants. Those who failed to find a host country were shipped en masse to Shanghai in August and September 1941, mere months before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. That attack made it impossible for them to travel elsewhere, with the result that they, like the Austrian Jews who had sailed to China earlier, stayed in Shanghai for the remainder of World War II.

Finally, what about Sugihara himself? After Kaunas, he received postings to East European locales through the rest of the war. Upon returning to Japan in 1947, the Foreign Ministry dismissed him under circumstances that remain unclear: it may have been a belated punishment, as his family maintains, or his country, then under Allied Occupation, may not have needed a diplomat with his skills. Afterward, he moved through a series of jobs, including working as a general manager at an American military post exchange that led him eventually to Moscow, where he helped Japanese companies manage their trade with Soviet Russia. In 1968, a recipient of one of his visas contacted him, after which he became increasingly, if reluctantly, famous for his deeds. In 1985, he became the first Asian honored at Yad Vashem with the Righteous Among the Nations Award sponsored by the government of Israel, which Ho later received. As for his motivations in Kaunas, he once said, "I didn't do anything special that people have to talk about. . . . I followed my own conscience and listened to it."

Comparing Ho and Sugihara

Historian Pamela Sakamoto has stated, "Many Japanese diplomats issued visas that saved Jews, but only a few like Sugihara saved Jews by issuing visas."⁸ Ho predates Sugihara in this regard, as both figures consciously rescued thousands of people. Strikingly, they did so as relatively neophyte diplomats: both



Chiune and Yukiko pose with their sons, Hiroki, Chiaki, and Haruki, in Königsberg, Germany. Source: <http://tinyurl.com/owx9nkl>.

were on their second postings, meaning that they had come to understand how diplomacy worked but did not necessarily feel bound to the minutia of the system, as might be true of senior diplomats.

It can be tempting to regard Sugihara more highly than Ho because of his formidable circumstances. Yet it is important to remember how perfectly Ho's actions suited his time and place. Although the Nazi government of Austria persecuted Jews with the aim of compelling them to emigrate, most countries refused to accept them. Ho's actions, along with the more circumspect deeds of other diplomats, helped enable nearly 70 percent of Austria's Jews to escape the Nazi Holocaust by emigrating elsewhere—a far higher rate than in most countries the Nazis conquered. While a Shanghai entry visa from Ho could not save anyone by itself, it at times helped refugees collect the documents they needed to leave Greater Germany. In short, it gave its recipients the gift of leverage.

In contrast, Sugihara formed part of a larger operation that included the Polish underground, the Dutch government-in-exile, the Joint Distribution Committee, and the USSR. He stands out more for his visa recipients because he ran a one-man consulate in which he personally issued visas rather than doing so through staff personnel. His dedication is abidingly moving; nevertheless, it is worth recalling that without a figure like Zwartendijk writing Curaçao "entry visas," his transit visas would have served little purpose.

The Broader Picture

Both Ho and Sugihara have been compared to Oskar Schindler, the German industrialist and Holocaust rescuer that director Steven Spielberg featured in *Schindler's List*. The bravery of all three figures is indeed a central reason to learn about their lives and circumstances. Yet there are other reasons to study our two diplomats.

Broadly, their stories display the "globality" of World War II, as events in one region of the world affected developments in another. For example, East Asian policies toward Jews were shaped by the eagerness of China and Japan, respectively, to attract both Nazi and American Jewish support in order to break their military stalemate on China's mainland. Sugihara's spying on German forces also serves as a reminder of the hollowness of the alliance that Japan was seeking to establish.

When American students contemplate World War II in Asia, they often carry mental images of collective Japanese *banzai* charges or Chinese civilians suffering en masse. However, the respective stories of Ho and Sugihara highlight the important fact that Asians displayed *individual* courage. Interestingly, both figures were Christian—Lutheran and Russian Orthodox, respectively—yet neither had imbibed the anti-Semitism that often accompanied European Christianity. From a pedagogical standpoint, it is also noteworthy that they displayed their valor in a context—the Nazi Holocaust—with which many students are at least somewhat familiar.

Finally, the theme of Asians rescuing Westerners stands in contrast to a common Western tendency to view Asians as perpetually in need of Western assistance. In this respect as well, the stories of Ho and/or Sugihara may further enrich courses on modern world or modern Asian history. ■

NOTES

1. Citations regarding Ho's and Sugihara's impact are excerpted from Manli Ho, "Remembering My Father, Dr. Feng Shan Ho," *China Daily*, last modified September 26, 2007, <http://tinyurl.com/q3tkyg2>; and Hillel Levine, *In Search of Sugihara: The Elusive Japanese Diplomat Who Risked His Life to Rescue 10,000 Jews from the Holocaust* (New York: The Free Press, 1996), 282.
2. There are various English renditions of Dr. Ho's name in use. A consistently *pinyin* transliteration reads as He Fengshan. The rendition Dr. Ho himself employed in his lifetime in Western contexts was Feng Shan Ho.
3. Fengshan He, *Wai jiao sheng ya si shi nian [My Forty Years as a Diplomat]* (Hong Kong: Zhongwen daxue chubanshe, 1990), 84–85. My translation.
4. Roberta S. Kremer, *Diplomat Rescuers and the Story of Feng Shan Ho* (Vancouver: Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre, 1999), 19.
5. For two accounts, see Levine, *In Search of Sugihara*, 232, and Jonathan Goldstein, "Motivation in Holocaust Rescue: The Case of Jan Zwartendijk in Lithuania, 1940," in *Lessons and Legacies VI: New Currents in Holocaust Research*, ed. Jeffrey M. Diefendorf (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2004), 72.
6. Levine, *In Search of Sugihara*, 232.
7. Yukiko Sugihara, *Visas for Life*, ed. Lani Silver and Eric Saul, trans. Hiroki Sugihara with Anne Hoshiko Akabori (San Francisco: Edu-Comm Plus, 1995), 134.
8. Pamela Rotner Sakamoto, *Japanese Diplomats and Jewish Refugees: A World War II Dilemma* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1998), 4.

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In the spring of this year, Ho Fengshan and Sugihara Chiune were awarded the 2015 Lyndon Baines Johnson Moral Courage Award by the Holocaust Museum Houston.

Source: Screen captures from videos produced by the Holocaust Museum Houston which tell the stories of two Holocaust survivors, Lotte Marcus on Ho Fengshan at <https://vimeo.com/126565014>, and Edith Hamer on Sugihara Chiune at <https://vimeo.com/126565013>.

DAVID B. GORDON is Professor of Asian History at Shepherd University in Shepherdstown, West Virginia. He wishes to thank historians Irene Eber and Gao Bei for their patient responses to his questions regarding the diplomats discussed here. All interpretations in the essay remain those of the author.