

“After the occupation of Poland in September 1939 by the Germans and the Soviets, some 15,000 Jews managed to flee from Poland to then neutral Lithuania. When the Soviets then occupied Lithuania in June 1940, these refugees were trapped. The most desired destinations, Palestine and the U.S, were now practically inaccessible. To get out of Europe, they would need first a destination (immigration) visa to some place - almost any place -, then a transit visa for any country through which they needed to travel to reach that destination, and finally a permit from the Soviets to leave the "Soviet paradise". But where could they hope to go?

As practically all foreign consulates had already been closed, the refugees' chances were slim indeed. They became even slimmer when it became known, in July 1940, that the USSR was about to annex Lithuania, making it part of the USSR (it happened on August 3rd ).

In late July, a scheme started to take shape that eventually saved some 2,200 lives. Somehow the idea was born of using Curaçao as a destination. Curaçao, an island in the Caribbean, was then a colony of the Netherlands. Holland itself had already been overrun by the Nazis, but its colonies remained free.

Jan Zwartendijk, the Dutch Consul in Kaunas (Kovno), the Lithuanian capital at the time, provided a notation to the Jewish refugees that declared that entry into Curaçao required no visa (this was meant to be a ruse: only Curaçao's governor was authorized to admit aliens). This notation became known as a "Curaçao visa", because it appeared to legitimise Curaçao as a destination.

The only potential way to reach Curaçao from Lithuania at that time was by train across Siberia to Vladivostok, then by ship to Japan, and on from there across the Pacific. Therefore, a transit visa was required from Japan, allowing travel through that country and a limited time to stay there to arrange passage to Curaçao.

Chiune Sugihara, the Japanese Consul in Kaunas, was cooperative and issued Japanese transit visas to all holders of Curaçao visas, even though he no doubt soon found out that these were not legitimate.

With both of these documents in hand, the refugees now needed one more vital document: a Soviet travel and exit permit to travel to Vladivostok and leave the USSR. Lithuanian citizens, who became Soviet citizens as of the annexation, in principle had no chance to get permission to leave: for a Soviet citizen to wish to leave was considered treasonous by the Soviet state. The Polish refugees, however, were still Polish citizens, and as such they were in a better position. No one knew how the Soviets, always unpredictable, would react to a request to leave. All the refugees feared that on their way through Siberia they might be pulled off the train. But it was their only chance. Not all took the risk of applying to the Soviets, but many did.

The Soviets, i.e. the NKVD (Stalin's secret police, later renamed KGB), for unknown reasons actually allowed the Jewish refugees, almost all Polish, to proceed to Vladivostok and to leave for Japan. As a result, about 2,200 Jews made it safely to Japan.”