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### Life is a Tapestry

Life is a tapestry. Each of us hold the threads to weave the story of our lives. We choose the pattern according to our beliefs and how we wish to be remembered. This is the story of one samurai and how his decision changed the world.

The year is 1939. A red thread, the color of the Japanese sun, is woven into the tapestry of Japanese Consul-General Sugihara. His government sends him to the capital of Lithuania. Soon after, Poland is invaded by the German Army. Jewish refugees flood into Lithuania with tales of unbelievable atrocities. Lithuania has always been a safe haven for Jews so they do not believe this fate could happen to them. Then, on June 15<sup>th</sup>, 1940 the Soviets invade Lithuania leaving the refugees no way out.

A thread of black is descending upon Europe. Most of Western Europe has been conquered by the dark evil represented by the Nazi regime. All foreign embassies are requested to leave Lithuania. Consul Sugihara asks for a 20-day extension. He and the Dutch Consul are the only ones remaining. Jewish refugees come up with a plan for freedom to escape to Dutch colonial islands in the Caribbean. To do this they must first obtain transit visas from the Japanese.

Consul Sugihara looked to his strict Japanese code of ethics and searches for *gambate* (the Japanese term for internal strength and resourcefulness) to guide his decision. In July 1940, he asks permission for visas for the Jewish refugees. He is looking for a green light to weave a thread of compassion from his government. Three times he asks. Three times he is denied.

With a thread of white, pure as a heart of a samurai, he follows his conscience. He is quoted as saying, "I may have to disobey my government, but if I don't I would be disobeying God."

The visas are as precious as threads of gold to the waiting thousands. For 29 days, from July 31 to August 28, 1940, he and his wife write and sign visas hour after hour, day after day. Over 300 visas are issued each day, which would normally have been a month's work. Even as he leaves on the train for Berlin on September 1<sup>st</sup>, he hands the consul's visa stamp to a refugee from the train window so his work can continue.

Six thousand Polish Jews with Sugihara visas go by trans-Siberian railroad to Vladivostok then on to Kobe, Japan. They later resettle in Shanghai, China. These Sugihara Survivors and their forty thousand descendants owe their lives to this man and his family. A blue thread of freedom has been woven back into their lives.

In 1945, the Japanese government dismisses Mr. Sugihara from his post as a diplomat. His career is shattered. He can never again work for the Japanese Foreign Service. Forty years later, Mr. Sugihara receives Israel's highest honor as one of the "Righteous Among the Nations" by Yad Vashem Martyrs Remembrance in Jerusalem. He dies a year later.

I have just begun my own life's tapestry. In my hand I hold the multicolored threads to weave the story of my life. Mr. Sugihara followed his dreams to live abroad,

explore other cultures and follow his own religious path. I hope I will have the courage to follow my conscience as Consul Sugihara has done and choose my own path towards building an understanding between people. A sense of on or duty drove Mr. Sugihara. As a Jew, I too have a duty to retell the stories of the Holocaust, survivors and its martyrs so that it will not be erased from the tapestry of human remembrance. When Mr. Sugihara was asked why he signed the visas he gave two reasons: "They were human beings and they needed help. I am glad I found the strength to make the decision to give it to them."

I hope throughout my life to see clearly as Mr. Sugihara did and choose the path of righteousness. In this way, my own tapestry will be a legacy for future generations.

Resource consulted ñ <http://www.us-israel.org/jsource/Holocaust/sugihara.html>