

Celebrating Civil Courage

by Judith Anderson

The heroes of history remain relevant today, for we will always need stories that remind us of the best that human nature has to offer. Gathering and sharing such narratives, the Wallenberg-Sugihara Civil Courage Society is inspired by the actions of two diplomats, Raoul Wallenberg and Chiune Sugihara, who saved tens of thousands of Jews during World War II. Many of the people they saved eventually settled here, enriching Canada's multicultural mix.

Raoul Wallenberg was Sweden's special envoy to Hungary in 1944, at the height of Nazi persecution of Hungarian Jews. Wallenberg issued protective passports and sheltered people in buildings designated as Swedish territory, saving tens of thousands of Jews from deportation and death. He disappeared into Soviet captivity on January 17, 1945, and was never seen again.



Chiune Sugihara, the Japanese consul in Kaunas, Lithuania during 1939 and 1940, rescued thousands of Jews who had fled there from Nazi-occupied Poland. In Lithuania, their situation was still precarious. Therefore, against orders, Sugihara wrote visas that allowed the desperate refugees to cross the USSR and enter Japan. There they had respite to organize the support and money needed to emigrate to Canada or the US, where Jewish refugees were not then readily accepted. Sugihara was not the only Japanese diplomat to risk everything in order to help refugees. The Jews carrying Sugihara's visas couldn't stay in Japan indefinitely. Those who had no means to leave Asia were allowed to move to Shanghai, at that time a Japanese colony with a large international community

including over 20,000 Jews. There they were safe until 1942, when Josef Meisinger, a leading architect of the Holocaust, visited Shanghai with a proposal for murdering all its Jewish residents. The Japanese vice consul in Shanghai, Mitsugi Shibata, was horrified by Meisinger's proposal and immediately informed the Jewish community. Forewarned, the Jewish leaders requested and received protection from Japan's government for the remainder of the war, despite Japan's alliance with Germany.

Wallenberg lost his life, Sugihara and Shibata sacrificed their diplomatic careers, and Shibata was brutally imprisoned. But for them, there was no choice – risking everything to help others was a moral imperative. Their actions exemplify true civil courage.

The Wallenberg-Sugihara Civil Courage Society was formed in 2013 by members of the Swedish and Jewish communities in Vancouver. Our members include some whose relatives were rescued by Wallenberg and Sugihara. We define civil courage as an act of personal risk or sacrifice intended to improve or save the lives of others who suffer from unjust laws, norms or conventions. Our goals are to honour the legacy of Wallenberg, Sugihara, and other past models of civil courage, while recognizing and encouraging acts of civil courage in our midst today.

To that end, each January, we organize the Raoul Wallenberg Day event. When possible, we present the Civil Courage Award to a living person connected to British Columbia, and we screen a film intended to get

Mary Kitagawa, 2012 NNM 2013.5.2.1.2



Mary Kitagawa (middle) with her husband Tosh (right) and Mits Sumiya, who was receiving his UBC diploma in 2012 after being expelled in 1942. NNM 2013.5.2.2.17

the audience thinking about injustice and how people respond. We welcome new volunteers and nominations for the Civil Courage Award.

In 2019, we were pleased to present the Civil Courage Award to Mary Kitagawa, honouring her resolute efforts on behalf of UBC students who were unjustly prevented from completing their degrees by the 1942 internment of Japanese Canadians. Please visit our website, wscs.ca, and stay tuned for news of the January 2020 event, when we'll screen the 2015 Japanese-produced film about Sugihara, *Persona Non Grata*.

Sources

In Search of Sugihara: The Elusive Japanese Diplomat Who Risked his Life to Rescue 10,000 Jews From the Holocaust, by Hillel Levine (1996)

The Fugu Plan: The Untold Story of the Japanese and the Jews During World War II, by Marvin Tokayer (2012)



Mary Kitagawa accepting the Wallenberg Sugihara Civil Courage Award for 2019. NNM TD965