SUMMARY. The article analyses activities of the Japanese Vice-Consul Chiune Sugihara, mainly focusing on his Kaunas period 1939–1940, when in the summer of 1940 he issued Japanese transit visas. Research is based on Russian archival sources: starting from Sugihara’s rejection as a translator in the Embassy of Japan in Moscow, later presenting USSR’s position regarding the transition through its territory via Trans-Siberian railroad. The article explains how decision on the Soviet side was made and what reasons forced Soviets to take such a decision. The role of Intourist, the official state travel agency of the USSR, and the agency’s sources are analysed, which provide several different interpretations of the transit, for example, it is stated in the agency’s documents that less children travelled with Sugihara’s visas than it is usually indicated in historiography. Finally, the issues related to forgeries of Sugihara’s visas and the number of people rescued by the Japanese Vice-Consul in Lithuania are discussed.

KEYWORDS: Chiune Sugihara, refugees, transit through USSR, number of issued visas, Intourist, NKVD, Politburo, Josif Stalin, Vladimir Dekanozov.

The article presents new and disputable facts about the circumstances, under which the Japanese diplomat was issuing visas to Jewish refugees, like the number of the documents issued and the role of the USSR in the transit of war refugees. The article is based predominantly upon materials from the Russian state and departmental archives.

An attempt to carry out a frontal survey in Russian archives was made during the research. It is known that Chiune Sugihara graduated from Harbin Gaikun University in Manchuria, where he studied Russian, therefore he became a fluent Russian speaker. After marrying a Russian woman in 1924, he converted to Russian Orthodoxy and received a new name – Sergey Pavlovich. At the age of 26 he had published a detailed account on the economy of the USSR, and in the 1930s he was an active participant in the negotiations with the USSR concerning the Chinese Eastern Railway. Documents of the People’s Commissariat for Foreign Affairs (NKID) and personal papers of Russian emigres concerning the activities conducted by Sugihara are held at the Russian State Archive of the Economy.
Sugihara is mentioned in the letter to Stalin dated July 10, 1932, (signed by Molotov and Kaganovich) that deals with yet another conflict on the Russian-Chinese border. The documents dated 1936–1941 at the Foreign Policy Archive of the Russian Federation (Arkhiv vneshnei politiki Rossiiskoi Federatsii, AVP RF) are directly related to the Japanese diplomat and the transit of Jewish refugees through the Soviet Union. In 1936–1937, Sugihara held his first diplomatic position as the secretary of the Japanese Consulate in Petropavlovsk-on-Kamchatka. In early 1937, he was supposed to start exercising his functions as a translator at the Japanese Embassy in Moscow, however, was declared persona non-grata. The causes to deny him a Russian visa are revealed in the work diary of Boris Stomoniakov, Assistant Commissar of Foreign Affairs (soon to be repressed). In a conversation with the Japanese Minister Mamoru Sigemicu on February 28, 1937, the soviet diplomat told him that Sugihara was “in closest relations to the most radical White émigré circles”, as well as “criminal elements”. According to him, “Sugihara’s activities in Manchuria were abnormal, illegal and unacceptable” as a person’s who “carried out anti-Soviet activities.” Paradoxically enough, the records did not prevent Sugihara from both surviving the Soviet captivity and his service in the Soviet Union in the 1960’s and 1970’s.

There was not enough attention paid by the Soviet diplomats to Sugihara’s appointment in Kaunas in October 1939 either. There was only a brief mention of the “Japanese vice-consul who “spoke fluent Russian” arriving from Finland in a report of a Soviet envoy to Lithuania. Besides, Soviet diplomats failed to associate the arrival of Sugihara with the change of the tone in the pro-Soviet (including Jewish) newspapers in regards to the Soviet-Finnish War – the fact that so unpleasantly surprised them…

Meanwhile, the departure of Jewish refugees from Lithuania to Japan is amply reflected. The main resources could be found in a special dossier of AVP RF. Most of these 10 documents include conversations between Soviet and Japanese diplomats. Three Soviet diplomats in Moscow and Vladivostok, as well as four Japanese diplomats, including the Consul in Vladivostok, participated directly in the negotiations over refugees. Several high-ranking soviet officials from the Politburo and

1 For example, letter of famous geologist, researcher of Far East E. E. Anert to the Japanese representatives (1933 February 23) concerning creation of Museum for research of Northern Manchuria, RGAЕ, F. 732, In. 1, File 165, 39.
3 AVP RF, F. 0146, In. 20, 176, File 5, 21–25.
4 AVP RF, F. 0146, In. 24, 227, File 46.
the NKVD were involved in the decision making: Viacheslav Molotov, the head of the Government and the People’s Commissar for Foreign Affairs (his signature can be found on the documents related), Anastas Mikoyan, the People’s Commissar for Foreign Trade, three deputies of the Commissar for Foreign Affairs, Vladimir Dekanozov, Andrey Vyshinsky and Solomon Lozovsky. Vsevolod Merkulov, the People’s Commissar of State Security, is also mentioned in the documents.

The file does not include any mention of Sugihara. However, archival resources do repeatedly mention either directly the role of Sugihara by indicating his position (“the Japanese consul in Kaunas”), or indirectly (by mentioning the background of the issue), and even by mistakenly indicating the place of visa issue (Tallinn instead of Kaunas). These documents provide us with the opportunity to answer several questions in order to shed light on the permission for the Jewish refugees to transit the territory of the USSR.

First, as specified, the initiative for the transit came from the Government of the independent Lithuania. Since late 1939, the Lithuanian envoy in Moscow Natkevičius had been unsuccessfully trying to win the right for the Jewish refugees for transit through Odesa to Haifa. Lithuanian authorities were ready to replace the Polish passports held by refugees with Lithuanian ones. The Government also attempted to persuade the Intourist of financial benefits of the transit. The “Japanese transit” was not considered at this point.

Second, the documents indirectly show the interests of the Soviet side in resolving both issues: the financial one and the one related to the importance of the intelligence. The main initiator from the Soviet side was Vladimir Dekanozov (former head of inner intelligence activities of NKVD). In his letter to Molotov dated April 21, 1940, he underlined that the USSR would be prepared to receive currency from the refugees and international Jewish organizations amounting to more than 1.5 million US dollars (about 900,000 rubbles). The very first lines of the letter mention that the case should be coordinated with the NKVD.

Third, the documents show that the Soviet side decisively stopped the Japanese attempt to send back part of the emigrants to Vladivostok in March 1940 because of falsified visas (more information on the issue is provided in the text below).

At the end of April 1940, the USSR was basically ready to allow refugees from Lithuania to pass through its territory to Palestine. Molotov made his decision regarding Dekanozov’s suggestion: to consider this suggestion and clarify the possibilities of carrying refugees by railroads and sea transport, as well as the means of transport used by Intourist. However, the question of the refugees became important only in July 1940. Only at that time due to Sugihara’s activities after the Soviet troops had entered Lithuania on June 15, 1940, and Dekanozov, as Kremlin
viceroy’s, arrival in Lithuania (later he was appointed the Soviet Ambassador to Germany, right at the time when Sugihara was there after leaving Kaunas). It was Sugihara’ activities that allowed to introduce a new haven for refugees – the Far East. A coded letter from Dekanzov to the Soviet envoy to Lithuania Pozdnia-kov, dated July 25, 1940, can be found in the TsK VKP (b) Fond at the Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhibiv sotsial’no-politicheskoi istorii, RGASPI). There he states that “Currently in Lithuania, especially in Vilnius, there are a lot of Jewish refugees from former Poland. Some of them still have Polish passports, while most of them have sauf conduits granted by Lithuanian authorities. In total, there are about 800 such refugees. In terms of their social background, these are yeshiva teachers and students, as well as salesmen, lawyers and representatives of other liberal professions. These refugees have relatives in Palestine and the United States, where they would like to leave. They have all got the necessary documents and money. Leaving these refugees in Lithuania is undesirable, hence we suggest to urgently allow the transit through the USSR and organise their departure in groups of 50 to 120 people. We are waiting for further instructions.”

It should be noted that that Dekanozov indicates a minimal number of the refugees, in contrast to the letter he wrote only two months ago, where the number was as high as 3,000–5,000 people, and he also finds additional arguments to allow the transit.

The Politburo TsK VKP (b) gave its approval signed by Stalin on July 29, 1940: “give the permission for the Jewish refugees from former Poland now staying in Lithuania the transit via the USSR”. Copies of this document were sent to Molotov and Beria.

This way the Soviet authorities, having their own motives, untied Chiune Sugihara’s hands to issues transit visas. Now, the minimal formal requirements of the Foreign Ministry of Japan were met: the refugees had permission to leave for the island of Curacao.

By simply looking at the list of visas issued by Sugihara one can see the eloquent reasons for the dynamics: the number of visas issued rockets as of July 25, and as of July 29 the visas are issued massively – the dates match the day when the inquiry was sent to Moscow and the day the approval was received.

In an enquiry of the People’s Commissariat for Foreign Affairs dated April 29, 1941, concerning transit emigrants going through Japan it is noted that “in August

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5 RGASPI, F. 17, In. 166f, File 627f, 92.
6 Ibid., In. 162, File 28f, 62.
1940, a significant number of transit visas valid for one year was issued by the Japanese Consul in Kaunas to Jewish refugees, who were leaving Lithuania for America”. Soviet diplomatic documents do not indicate the exact number of visas issued by Sugihara. However, the aforementioned list of refugees who received transit visas from the Consul in Kaunas is stored at the Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. Sugihara gave the list to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan on February 5, 1941. The list includes 2,139 names for the period as of July 9, 1940 (including seven Soviet citizens).

However, biographies of Sugihara usually mention 6,000 visas issued by him, while the number of rescued refugees sometimes reaches 10,000. The latter is explained by the presence of many children, who were indicated in the passports of their parents (based on a single visa, that they were included all in). What are the numbers the Soviet resources provide with?

The economic review of the Intourist for 1940 gives the number of 1,472 refugees from Lithuania who proceeded in transit to Vladivostok in 1940. The number included 242 foreigners, who were hoping to receive entry visas from foreign embassies located in the territory of the USSR. Thus, most likely, 1,230 refugees had visas issued by Sugihara.

The economic review of the Intourist for 1941 states that in January and February of 1941 alone 1,500 transit passengers proceeded in the direction of Vladivostok. It should be noted that there were no transit passengers from Latvia and Estonia in 1941.

It is also necessary to mention that the documents indicate the number of customers transported by the Intourist and not the number of visas.

There’s an important piece of information in the documents of the Intourist, according to which children older than two years were regarded as paying passengers.

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7 It was during this period that the Japanese side had become interested in the ethnic composition of the emigrants. These questions were addressed to G. N. Zarubin, the Head of Consular Department, People’s Commissariat for Foreign Affairs (later the Ambassador of the USSR to the USA and the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs) by Saito, Secretary of Japanese Embassy in Moscow on the 1 of February 1941. Three weeks later Mr. Saito gave concrete question: are all refugees Jewish? Mr Zarubin replied: Not all, but plurality of them.

8 In 1941 Sugihara himself testified that Jewish refugees consisted about 1,500 persons. In 1967 Sugihara in the letter replying to Polish historian mentioned 3,500 refugees whom received his visas, but only 500 were Jewish. Archive of The Russian Research and Educational Holocaust Center, F. 8, In. 1, File 53, 12.


11 Ibid., 15.


13 Ibid., 5.
Another document notes that there was a total of 85 children among transit passengers (including the non-Jewish and those traveling to other destinations than Vladivostok) in the first half of 1941.

The report entitled “The Situation of the Jewish refugees in Japan” as of June 7, 1941, addressed to the American Jewish Congress by its representative in Japan Dr Moise Moiseeff also testifies that there was no arrival of Jewish children to Japan on a massive scale. According to this document, there were 1046 refugees in Kobe from June 1940 to May 1941, and only 57 of them were children.

Therefore, contrary to the opinion of many historians, the number of children was insignificant. The whole complex of these cases has been identified in the course of working at the Lithuanian Special Archives. By March 1, 1941, Soviet intelligence service had identified 492 counterfeit visas (the beginning of their productions was traced back to December 1940). We can assume that after Sugihara left Kaunas and until the manufacturers and the holders of such visas were identified, only a few hundred Jewish holders of counterfeit visas had left the USSR.

By analysing documents from Russian archives and comparing them with other resources we can once again testify the authenticity of the Sugihara List dated February 5, 1941.

Having in mind that not every holder of visa issued by the Japanese diplomat was able to leave the USSR for various reasons, as well as bearing in mind the presence of counterfeit visas, we can presume that up to 2,500 Jewish refugees left the USSR for Japan with these documents.

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14 Ibid., 4.
15 GARF, F. P-9612, In. 1, File 66, 49.
16 YVA, P-20, f. 20, 24–25. The copy is taken from Zorah Warhaftig archive, one of the leaders of Jewish refugees organizations in Lithuania, later minister of Religious affairs in the State of Israel, as well as the author of valuable memoirs.
17 Lithuanian Special Archives, F. K-1, In. 58, tracing file No. 31778/3, 37504/3, P-12661, P-70701, P-12757 and others.
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Ilya Altman

RUSIJOS ARCHYVŲ DOKUMENTAI APIE CHIUNE’ĖS SUGIHAROS IŠDUOTAS VIZAS KARO PABĖGĖLIAMS

SANTRAUKA. Straipsnyje analizuojama Japonijos vicekonsulo Chiune’ės Sugiharos veikla.
Labiausiai dėmesys kreipiamas į jo darbo Kaune 1939–1940 m. periodą, kai 1940 m. vasarą jis
įsdažė daug Japonijos tranzitinių vizų. Tyrimas grindžiamas Rusijos archyvų šaltinius: prade-
dama nuo to, kodėl Sugihara nebuvo sovietų pusės patvirtintas kaip vertėjas Japonijos ambasa-
doje Maskvoje, taip pat pristatoma SSRS pozicija dėl galimybės 1940 m. kirsti šalies teritoriją
Transsibiro geležinkelį. Straipsnyje pateikiama šio sprendimo analizė ir pagrindiniai faktoriai,
lėmę tokią SSRS vadovų apsidūrimą. Tyrimo remiamasi ir valstybinės kelionių agentūros
Inturist dokumentais, kurių duomenys leidžia teigti, jog su Sugiharos vizomis keliavo mažiau
vaikų nei dažniausiai tvirtinama istoriografijoje. Taip pat analizuojamas padirbtų Sugiharos vizų
klausimas ir bendras Japonijos diplomato išgelbėtų asmenų skaičius.

RAKTAŽODŽIAI: Chiune Sugihara, pabėgėliai, tranzitas per SSRS, išduotų vizų skaičius,
Inturist, NKVD, Politbiuras, Josifas Stalinas, Vladimiras Dekanozovas.