



Sugihara, Zwartendijk and Wallenberg – Examples of Civic Courage Relevant to the Modern World

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Presentation about an international seminar, and a few personal thoughts

On October 23, 2024, in Kaunas, and on October 24 in Vilnius, Lithuania, an international seminar on the lessons of civic courage from diplomats, the Righteous Among the Nations, took place. The topics included Sweden’s representative Raoul Wallenberg, the Netherlands’ – Jan Zwartendijk and Japan’s – Chiune Sugihara. The Seminar was jointly organized by the Sugihara “Diplomats for Life” Foundation and the Swedish Embassy in Lithuania. The seminar was funded by the Swedish Institute.

The organizers chose a unique format for the seminar: the speakers’ presentations were accompanied by the sounds of traditional Jewish music – klezmer – performed by Semmy Stahlhammer, a violinist from Sweden. This was the first surprise of the seminar: in Sweden, Stahlhammer was in contact with his colleague who was saved by Chiune Sugihara’s visa, and he had devoted part of his life to collecting klezmer music. The first klezmer pieces performed during the seminar came to us, partly, according to Stahlhammer, thanks to Sugihara. Had his colleague not received a Sugihara visa, he most probably would not have survived.

One of the main goals of the seminar’s organizers was already apparent from the very beginning: to discuss not only the great diplomats and Jewish rescuers, but also

to discover new angles of analysis and memory of their deeds, to find connections that were previously unknown, or to offer new perspectives for interpretations.

The Swedish Ambassador to Lithuania, Lars Wahlund, speaking from his own professional experience, testified that Sugihara, Zwartendijk and Wallenberg had to make a great deal of courage and moral effort to act in an essentially passive or hostile environment, to make many independent decisions that were not approved by their leadership, and that this is already an offence in the hierarchically organized diplomatic service.

The second aspect touched upon by the Swedish Ambassador in Lithuania was the issue of the rescuers' visibility and recognition: when he was still in the gymnasium, his music teacher was Valdemar Langlet's wife. Valdemar Langlet was one of the first Esperantists in the world, he organized Esperanto activities in Sweden; later was invited to teach Swedish in Budapest, where he also worked for the Swedish Embassy and the Red Cross.

When the Holocaust broke out and he witnessed the persecution of Budapest's Jews, he initiated the issuing of Swedish Red Cross certificates declaring that their holders had special protection pending their Swedish citizenship. This model, which he developed, was later widely used by Raoul Wallenberg. However, Ambassador Wahlund pointed out that Mr. Langlet's activities in Sweden were not and are not known at all. Like most Righteous Among the Nations, Langlet did not talk about his rescue activities during the Second World War. It is true that Langlet received the title of Righteous Among the Nations in 1965, five years after his death, but his memory as a rescuer of Jews is, in principle, completely absent in Sweden and the world.

Swedish professor and historian Bengt Jangfeldt presented one of the most famous Righteous Among the Nations, Swedish diplomat Raoul Wallenberg. His name is often mentioned in the context of the contribution of diplomats to the rescue of Jews. In his presentation, professor revealed the possible reasons why Wallenberg was chosen for the Jewish rescue mission in Budapest. This was also influenced by his personal biography: having lost his father right before he was born, Raoul was brought up by his mother and his grandfather, member of one of Sweden's most prominent families. His grandfather tended to repeat that Raoul would achieve something special in his life. After his high school education, his grandfather sent Raoul to study in the USA, where he was trained as an architect, volunteered in the US army, and, after his return to Europe, started his own business and developed trade with Hungary. These experiences, Jangfeldt said, led Raoul Wallenberg being chosen for the rescue mission. The historian pointed out that Wallenberg's rescue of Jews in Budapest was systematically and strongly supported by both the US and Swedish governments, and in this respect he was exceptional, or even unique – rescue mission was designed and coordinated by the USA, fundings for Wallenberg's activities came from USA Jewish organizations, at the same time salary for him was paid by the Swedish government, and his leverage

for protecting Hungarian Jews was by issuing them *Schutzpass* Wallenberg's designed documents, stating that holders will eventually get Swedish citizenship.

Jangfeldt also draw attention to the small details of the *Schutzpasses* – they were printed in the Jewish printing house in Budapest, but the emblem of the Sweden was put upside-down: one crown should be at the bottom and two – upwards, and in the documents, there were two crowns at the bottom and one above.

Wallenberg's diplomatic mission also had an exceptional ending: defending the Jews he had avoided Nazi reprisals, but he deliberately stayed behind when the Red Army appeared in Budapest, intending to pass on his experience and advice to the new "hosts" how to proceed with the Jewish community. However, Wallenberg was soon arrested, taken to Lubyanka Prison and died there under mysterious circumstances in 1947. According to a long-hidden but later made public medical report, it was allegedly from a heart attack. Prof. Jangfeldt pointed out that Wallenberg's biography was exceptional and perhaps the best known, but this is also the case to look for other examples to compare and analyze.

The presentation by Arlette Liwer-Stuip was of different nature. It was not the result of academic work, as Liwer told her family story – her grandfather Abraham Liwer was saved by Sugihara and Zwartendijk, and when he left the USSR through the port of Vladivostok, he was able to recover his wife and daughter from the Siberian exile, and to go to Japan and finally to settle in the USA. The grandmother and aunt of Arlette Liwer-Stuip were among the first Polish citizens to be released from Siberian exile.

However, in her presentation, Liwer-Stuip also highlighted a partial imbalance in memory – most of the other stories are about Sugihara, while Zwartendijk is barely mentioned or completely forgotten. However, it is clear that without each other these two diplomats could not have saved, as is often said, some 6,000 lives, because the former issued transit visas for Japan, while the latter gave the final destination visa, so that Zwartendijk's visas for Curaçao, the final destination, in a way 'employed' and justified the transit visas for Japan.

Hikari Bun, a PhD student from Heidelberg University, coming from Japan, spoke about the evaluations of Japanese tourists who visited the Sugihara House Museum in Kaunas, regarding Sugihara. Bun conducted 61 interviews with individual Japanese visitors to Sugihara House Museum.

The material presented showed that the Japanese diplomat was viewed very positively, as an inspiring role model, in some of the responses he was compared to other famous Japanese people, and to today's Japanese athletes.

The answers presented by Bun did not show a specific knowledge of Sugihara's activities by the interviewees, such as the fact that he is still the only Japanese person to hold the title of Righteous Among the Nations, the reasons why he started issue of visas, etc. However, it was stressed that it is of particular importance to Japanese visitors that Sugihara was one of the few to set an example of humanism and compassion in a

difficult situation. Also, his personal qualities such as: determination, strength of will, perseverance, generosity, humanitarianism, courage, and independence were mentioned.

Hikari Bun not only presented her data, but also tried to summarize it theoretically, identifying what qualities are needed for a hero, what makes a hero unique, national, and what gives him a transnational dimension, makes him universal and more widely known. These insights were based on Tanja Schult's book on Wallenberg, "A hero's many faces. Raoul Wallenberg in contemporary monuments".

Bun recited Schult's idea that many heroes of 20th century have national characteristics – they sacrificed or died for their nation and people, contributed to the development of their countries, but Wallenberg represents a different type of hero – non-patriotic or universal hero, putting his efforts to help unknown people, having with them no bounds by the citizenship, living space, traditions etc. Bun finalized her presentation adding that Japanese tourist also see Sugihara as universal hero because of his cosmopolitan life, neglect in his own nation (the statement that Sugihara was fired from his diplomatic position after the war because of the "Kaunas incident" – Japanese visas issuance in Kaunas) and that his survivors are scattered around the world.

In the discussions part, a common denominator was found – recognition to these three diplomats presented at the seminar came rather late. As well as Wallenberg, differently than Sugihara and Zwartendijk, had organized support from the Swedish government and USA, which was a crucial point. On the other had it was underlined that the Swedish foreign office at that time was rather skeptical, realizing that Wallenberg was issuing hundreds of *Schutzpasses*, and that is intolerable from the perspective of a reliable diplomat. The fear was that in this mass of papers promising Swedish citizenship, Sweden could get unreliable or dangerous persons in its territory. Partially because of this, recognition for Wallenberg was also delayed, and came only when he became an honorary citizen of the USA in 1981, actually being only the second, after Winston Churchill. But governments of Sweden, Japan and Netherlands were slow in recognizing their diplomats – first, survivors' testimonies came, then organizations and institutions dealing with the Holocaust paid their tribute, and finally home countries' officials followed.

A few post scriptum remarks

It is close to 30 years of dealing with diplomatic efforts in rescuing European Jewry from annihilation. The first exhibitions opened around 1995 and are appearing from time to time in different countries and spaces. In this perspective the initiatives and long-lasting work of Eric Saul from USA should be mentioned. His inspiration on working on diplomats rescuing the Jews actually came from the example of Chiune Sugihara¹.

¹ Eric Saul *Biography* [žiūrēta 2024 11 15]. Prieiga per internetą: <http://www.easaul.com/biography.html/>

Now, different countries are more and more concentrating on their diplomats' rescuing attempts. Quite recent examples could include one of collective efforts, coordinated by Polish diplomat in Switzerland Aleksander Ładoś, usually called the Ładoś group, and second, quite recent recognition of Jan Zwartendijk by the Dutch government: in September 2023 he was honored by the Medal for Acts of Humanity in Gold.

The Sugihara "Diplomats for Life" Foundation, an NGO based in Kaunas (established in 1999) is working in the same area and is maintaining the former Japanese Consulate building – the very place where, in the summer of 1940, Japanese viceconsul in Kaunas Chiune Sugihara was issuing Japanese transit visas mainly to Jewish refugees from Poland – as the museum not only tells this part of the story, but also is open intellectual hub for new researches, seminars, conferences and meaningful meetings.

The above presented seminar was possible thanks to the cooperation of the Swedish Embassy in Lithuania and Swedish Institute support. The Foundation in its title has Sugihara's name but its aim is bigger – to monitor, research and share information about diplomats involved into the rescue operations.

That's why taking the example of 3 diplomats was a good opportunity to mark new lines not only in presenting the concrete cases of rescue, but also to search for some new discoveries and intellectual exchanges.

A very fruitful part of the seminar was identifying the features of a hero. Professor B. Jangfeldt, in his presentation, noted that this word is rather discharged – for example, a football player who scores the pivotal goal in a game is also called a hero. Also, general and universal features of the hero were mentioned: this is a person who did something extraordinary, impressive, seemingly acted alone and his personal fate was rather tragic. So, from this perspective Wallenberg is a perfect example of a hero, but the seminar showed that his recognition was rather late, and initiated not in his home country.

To this perspective Bun's ideas of national and transnational heroes contributed a lot, highlighting the 19th–20th centuries tradition that usually heroes are ours – they did something, sacrificed or even died for their country and people. Though today's world situation shows that fragmentation is only increasing, radical self-orientated ideas find more and more support and recognition, so perceiving exceptional acts of bravery and humanitarianism as only our group qualifications might just increase isolated self and world perception. That's why transnational heroes are important – they can set the example of loyalty, love and commitment to our people, country and tradition, but exactly these qualities made them to act for different, strange unknown people. In seminar largely presented cases of Wallenberg, Sugihara and Zwartendijk clearly showed that this is not only blurry intellectual construct or wishful thinking – it seems that devotion to our goals and values does not mean neglect and turning back to the others. Real patriotism could work as a trigger for outside – international activities.

Also, what was importantly noticed in the seminar was that from the beginning of discourse on diplomats rescuing Jews, new names appeared and are still appearing,

so it is important continuously to revise this field, add new research and make it accessible to the wider public. Some would say a new discovery in Polish diplomacy is the Ładoś group, but simultaneously we should not forget the Polish ambassador in Japan, Tadeusz Romer, who tremendously helped the Sugihara-Zwartendijk arrivals in Japan. If not for his initiatives and networking there is a great possibility that the Jewish refugees would have been sent out from Japan, or suffered some harder restrictions, because formalities and institutions usually do not have feelings and compassion – but people do.

Also, while it is the true and right way to present the Sugihara and Zwartendijk activities in the summer of 1940 in Kaunas as joint activity, the oral tradition would emphasize that these two diplomats never met and did not elaborate plans of joint activities, unlike, for example Wallenberg's mission. Part of the Sugihara legend says that he was the only Japanese diplomat issuing visas through Japan, but with 30 years of research we now know that his study colleague, Japanese consul in Vladivostok Saburo Nei, was also giving such visas, as well as the Japanese ambassador in Moscow, Yoshitsugu Tatekawa.

There are two final remarks. The first comes from an educational and identity point – if a person is presented as a hero – would I be able to identify with him/her? Since quite often we do not feel ourselves having some extra powers. But presenting the hero as normal person with his milieus, niggles and wider context might help to overcome this mental and imagination barrier – the choice you are making is always important even if it seems unpopular, against the bigger group etc. So from this perspective we should change our fixation on a hero as a single actor: even in heroic fairy-tales heroes have their helpmates, so historical narratives should speak not only in the name of main figure – the hero, but to present the group or team work.

From a scholar's point of view, new research is carried out across the world, focusing on diplomats helping Jewish people to avoid annihilation. But the time has come to join the knowledge and experience into a broader picture, adding new discoveries and stories of rescuers and rescued, because as a rule these stories are about patriotism but also about empathy, of individual courage but also about teamwork, about breaking the borders but creating new networks.