At Long Last

As my title indicates, at long last we have a study of a phenomenon long talked about, long speculated about, and only now for the first time in English actually studied. Numerous writers and speakers have pontificated about the now legendary Sugihara Chiune and the role of Japanese diplomacy in saving thousands of Jewish lives on the eve of the Holocaust, but with the publication of this book by Pamela Rotner Sakamoto and that of Hillel Levine’s In Search of Sugihara (The Free Press, 1996), we now have two solid studies of this important topic.

The real strength of Sakamoto’s work is that she has done what no other Western scholar has done. She has pored over the many documents in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs archives to track down the role played by Japanese diplomats in Central and Eastern Europe (as well as in Tokyo) in confronting the issue of numerous Jews seeking refuge away from the coming cataclysm. In addition she has worked in numerous archives in the United States as well, and then attempted to put the whole story back together like an immensely complicated jigsaw puzzle.

If I were to cite any fault with this study, it would be that, as a work of history, it is still too close to the documents. Indeed, the diplomatic correspondence is what enlivens and makes it all work, but more context both in Japan and in Europe would help the uninitiated reader a great deal. It is not absent here—we would just like more. As a work in the narrower field of diplomatic history, though, this work is no more or less at fault than many others.

Sakamoto’s finest achievement is, on the one hand, to explain the extraordinarily complex process by which Jews in, especially, Lithuania came upon Japan as a country whose transit visa could save them—usually with an entry visa from elsewhere; and, on the other, how Sugihara found himself in a position to issue over 2000 such visas. Where Levine got closer than anyone has thus far toward explaining who Sugihara really was, Sakamoto places him in the labyrinthine maze of the prewar Japanese Foreign Office bureaucracy.

One of the earlier sections of her book deals with the background of anti-Semitism in Japan. This chapter could have used some more nuance. There is, for example, no mention of the notorious anti-Semite Shioden Nobutaka (a.k.a. Fujiwara Nobutaka) who wrote voluminously and viciously on the evils of the Jews to Japan; a multilingual scholar, he also translated the Protocols of the Elders of Zion (from Russian) and Mein Kampf (from German) into Japanese, and he worked to see their arguments disseminated. Nor is there any mention of General Higuchi Kiichiro who is often credited with saving thousands of Jewish lives by allowing them to enter Manzhouguo (Manchukuo) without their papers completely in order. In mentioning the omnipresent Dr. Abraham Kaufman, leader of the Harbin Jewish community, she notes that “Kaufman was respected by all who met him” (p. 18). Clearly, this is an exaggeration, for Kaufman spent over a decade in the Soviet Gulag after World War II, apparently having failed to earn the “respect” of the Red Army.
Somewhat earlier, though, Sakamoto raises a telling enigma: “Although Japan persecuted other Asians, Jews were Caucasians who were treated differently.” Raising this issue is important enough, but unfortunately she never asks why this would have been the case. Why, for instance, did the Japanese military so miserably abuse the Chinese and Koreans (and other Asians), who were their putative allies according to their own propaganda, while saving so many Jewish lives, people who were marked for extermination by their Nazi allies or who sometimes even carried passports of enemy states? Of course, the Japanese mistreated enemy Caucasian POWs, but many thousands survived, whereas the Japanese military left brutality and murder wherever it went on Asian terrain.

In short, this is a welcome addition to our unfolding understanding of Japanese wartime behavior. It uses the Japanese diplomatic archives to the fullest extent to this point. A fuller accounting of Japanese-Jewish relations would have to use materials in Chinese, Russian, Yiddish, German, and perhaps Hebrew as well. We await future scholarship in these areas. One note on the index to the book: it is extremely uneven. Many names in the text are not in it, and many references in the text to names that are in the index are not given.

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