REAL-WORLD HERO: SEMPO SUGIHARA

1900–1986

"I cannot allow these people to die, people who had come to me for help with death staring them in the eyes. Whatever punishment may be imposed upon me, I know I should follow my conscience."

Just before the beginning of World War II, in March 1939, Japanese diplomat Sempo Sugihara was sent to Kaunas, Lithuania to open an office to represent the Japanese government there. The temporary capital of Lithuania, Kaunas was strategically set between Germany and the Soviet Union, in Northeastern Europe. By September of that year, Germany's National Socialist (Nazi) government led by Adolf Hitler had invaded Poland, and Britain and France had declared war on Germany. Fearing for their lives under the Nazis, who had enacted a series of laws to terrorize the Jews of Germany, a wave of Jewish refugees fled to Lithuania in search of safety.

Escape from the Nazi-controlled areas of Europe was almost impossible for Jews, and the Soviet Union would not permit them to enter unless they could demonstrate that their intention was not to stay, but only to pass through the country on their way to a final destination. Two countries remained options for the Jews of Kaunas: Curacao and Dutch Guiana. Jews were allowed to enter, but they needed transit visas – the vital documents that would allow them to travel through the Soviet Union. Suddenly, the hopes of survival for thousands of Jews rested on the shoulders of Sempo Sugihara.

When the Japanese government denied Sugihara's request on behalf of the refugees three times, he literally took matters into his own hands. With the unflagging help of his wife Yukiko, Sugihara wrote and signed thousands of visas by hand. In fact, when he was finally forced to close the diplomatic office and leave Lithuania, he continued to issue visas from his window seat on the train until the very last possible moment. As he departed, he gave the official visa stamp to one of the refugees, so he could carry on the Jewish rescue effort.

Although it ultimately cost him his diplomatic service career, Sugihara's selfless actions saved the lives of more than 6,000 Jews – the second largest number of Jews rescued from the Nazis by a single person.