

Migration and Transfer

6 Vladivostok and Intourist: Refugee Flows to the North Pacific, 1940–1941

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Abstract In 1987, Mikhail Gorbachev declared that he would like Vladivostok to become the USSR’s “widely opened window to the East.” The largest number of foreigners to pass through the city between 1922 and 1991 occurred in late 1940 and early 1941, and this article details how this happened. Having been granted visas by the Japanese consul in Kaunas, Lithuania, over 3,000 transit passengers crossed Siberia and took ship to Japan, saving their lives from the impending Holocaust. This paper greatly expands our knowledge of the central part played by the USSR in that transit, with Intourist, the national tourism monopoly, the Foreign Ministry, and the NKVD all playing significant roles. Materials are drawn mainly from Soviet and Japanese archives.

Vladivostok became very important in 1940. From a small border transfer point, from the ship to the railroad and from the railroad to the ship, it turned into a concentration point for large parties of transit passengers.

(“Intourist Economic Overview for 1940,” GARF, f. R-9612, op. 1, d. 66, l. 12)

The first half of the twentieth century was a mixed blessing for the city of Vladivostok, Russia’s only significant port on the Sea of Japan at the time. As a bellwether of Russia’s involvement with the North Pacific and the countries along its littoral, the various roles and functions enjoyed by Vladivostok at any given moment can also tell us much about capital intentions—first Saint Petersburg, then Moscow. As home to the Russian Pacific Fleet and the site where the first spike of the Trans-Siberian was driven by the Tsarevich Nikolai, soon to be tsar, Vladivostok was dominant in security matters until the end of the nineteenth century; but after 1901, when Vladivostok lost its central place in Russia’s Pacific trade to the new city of Dal’nii, and after 1905, when

Admiral Togo sank almost the whole Russian Pacific Fleet, Vladivostok's star shone less brightly. Shelled in 1904, occupied and reoccupied under Red and White and multinational armies in 1918–1922, vulnerable Vladivostok would lose its status as the capital of the Russian Far East to Khabarovsk and only in the 1940s rise again to “rule the East” in accordance with its name.¹

But even as Vladivostok, together with the collapse of Tsarist Russia's imperial dreams, lost much of its relevance for “ruling the East,” it remained a valuable link in the Great Eurasian artery. Lost vistas on the Pacific led to increased travel and heightened control across the length and breadth of Siberia. In a historic drama that mainly involved Poles, Lithuanians, and Japanese, the USSR and the Soviet tourism monopoly—Intourist—would play a central role by operating and profiting from Eurasian transit. Below, I provide the necessary international relations background, East and West, for 1939–1941 before demonstrating how the world's only Eurasian power helped save thousands of Jews facing an impending Holocaust. The story of Sugihara Chiune's visas has been told many times, but the role of the Soviet Union in making it possible for the refugees to cross the USSR and be saved has yet to be told;² and this involved the USSR's special geographic role as a Eurasian transit corridor. As Intourist's annual report introduced the greatly expanded category of “transit tourism,”³

Thanks to its geographic position and to the fact that the USSR stayed out of the war, its broad territory and roads, linking the Western borders with the Far East (China, Japan) and the Near East (Afghanistan, Iran, Greece, Turkey) became the most convenient and safest routes not only with these countries, but even with America across the Pacific Ocean.

- 1 For general treatments of the history of Vladivostok, see Hara Teruyuki, *Urajiostoku monogatori* and John Stephan, *Russian Far East*, in particular chapters 17–28 on the Soviet period.
- 2 For the Sugihara affair from many angles, see Sugihara, *Rokuseinin*; Shiraishi Masaaki, *Choho no tensai*; Palasz-Rutkowska and Romer, “Polish–Japanese Co-operation” 285–316; Levine, *Sugihara*; Sakamoto, *Japanese Diplomats*.
- 3 “Ekonomicheskii obzor” (hereafter, “Economic Overview”), Gosudarstvennyj Arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii (hereafter, GARF), f. R-9612, op. 1, d. 66, l. 12. Intourist was the Soviet national monopoly on tourism, run by the Ministry of Foreign Trade, but with close connections to the Foreign Ministry and security organs. For an overview, see Hazanov, “Porous Empire.”

In the course of 1940–1941, Vladivostok would see more foreign visitors than at any time between 1922 and 1991, a brief and narrow opening to the Pacific.

In the spring of 1940, it became clear that the Soviet Union would take over the Baltic countries in a more direct manner: a direct administrative subordination, a process that would lead from enhanced military presence to full incorporation into the Soviet polity as three additional Soviet socialist republics. With Lithuania no longer independent and Kaunas no longer a capital, all embassies and consulates would close. As a corollary, Polish officers working for the Japanese consulate would no longer be welcome on Lithuanian, soon Soviet, soil. Such Polish citizens with political or military records had already been detained, deported, and many shot, at Katyn a few months earlier. Jews—refugees from Poland—would also be at risk as foreigners of uncertain affiliation with a bad reputation for “capitalistic” behaviours. Death or deportation loomed. It was also plain to see that the ultra-racist Nazis, with their evil intentions toward Jews and Poles alike clear enough, were just across the border and unsated after devouring Poland. The horrific killing ghettos of Warsaw and Lodz had already been created as the German leadership groped its way toward a final solution.

Against this background and following the zero-sum logic of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact’s secret clauses, the Soviets took full control, violating the recognition of Lithuanian sovereignty in the Soviet–Lithuanian Treaty of 1920. Soviet troops were introduced; some minor resistance was put down; fixed single-candidate elections were organised to reconstitute three Communist-controlled governments that then asked for admission to the Soviet Union as newly-minted Soviet republics.⁴ By the end of July 1940, three nations of Europe had disappeared. When the first round of arrests was made, acting Consul Sugihara Chiune, an intelligence officer with fluent Russian serving as Japanese representative to Kaunas, dispatched a telegram to the Foreign Minister in Tokyo:⁵

4 An almost identical process occurred almost simultaneously in Latvia and Estonia. For a fuller description of the takeover process, see Wolff and Moullec, *Le KGB*.

5 Telegram No. 50, 28 July 1940. Foreign Ministry Archive materials online at Japan Center for Asian Historical Records B04013208800 91.

Sent on 28 July and arrived 29 July 1940
Secret

To Foreign Minister Matsuoka
From Acting Consul Sugihara
No. 50

The Communists' operation in this country is rapidly proceeding under the influence of the GPU's relentless and lightning terrorist attacks. With the Red Army advancing, the GPU began to assault the headquarters of Polish, White émigré, Lithuanian and Jewish political organisations and confiscated their membership lists. Three days before the election, the GPU began a mass roundup of the members on the list and continues to do so. 1,500 people in Vilnius and 2,000 in other regions have been arrested. Most of the arrested were former Polish army personnel and officials, White émigré officers [...] socialist party members, Bundists and Zionist Jews. Former Prime Minister Antanas Merkys, and Foreign Minister Juozas Urbšys were sent to Moscow with their families. A week ago, 1,600 detained Polish military personnel were sent to Samara. [...] Jews rushed to our consulate in order to get visas to the United States via Japan. The number of such Jews amounts to around one hundred every day.

What Sugihara did not mention in his telegram was that he had already begun granting visas to desperate applicants fearing the worst at either German or Soviet hands. Working with a few trusted helpers, Sugihara granted more than two thousand visas in short order, signing documents from morning to night, right up until the last days of his stay in Kaunas. Sugihara and his team mass-produced visas in just a few minutes each. Sugihara met many of the visa applicants, but not all. There just wasn't time. It also appears that Sugihara negotiated with the Soviet proconsul Dekanozov or his representatives to allow transit visas across Siberia, without which the Japanese transit visas would have been useless. Sugihara may not have realised how ready some authorities on the Soviet side would be to work with him to move the refugees out of harm's way. Intourist, the Soviet travel agency charged with handling all foreigner tourists, would actually provide the transportation and lodging along the way.

The motivation of the Soviet side is an interesting question and an important one. Intourist documents tend to present an economic logic, but

that is more a function of the institution rather than a reflection of the Soviet leadership consensus. Money was indeed made, but not a very large sum. Most of the Jews travelled in third class, the cheapest way to go. On the other hand, the American ambassador to Moscow reported that the NKVD was planting moles in the group transiting through Russia to new lives outside of Eurasia.⁶ This would suggest another Soviet motivation for allowing several thousand people to transit out of Europe. Just as Timothy Snyder records the passage of Polish officers hidden among the masses of Jewish refugees, the NKVD might also have made use of this pipeline;⁷ but there is no clear documentation on this question of motivation, so it remains an object for speculation. Similarly, Sugihara's motivation remains opaque. Motivation is the main theme of Hillel Levine's *In Search of Sugihara*, with a prelude, interlude, and postlude all devoted to trying to draw out the elusive intelligence officer. Levine, frustrated in his attempt, addresses Sugihara's shade: "I cannot tell, exactly, how you meant to be understood. Your old spy instincts are at work; I do not know what is the actual and what is the cover."⁸

But what is clear is that Soviet interest in providing transit predated the arrival of Sugihara in Kaunas. Already in April 1940, Deputy Commissar of the Foreign Ministry Vladimir Georgevich Dekanozov, who would soon be appointed Soviet plenipotentiary in Lithuania, petitioned Molotov (already a second time) to allow Intourist to handle the transit for 3,000–5,000 Jews from the Baltic countries.⁹

In December 1939, "Intourist" placed before the NKID (People's Commissariat of International Affairs) a question about the organisation of transit through the USSR to Palestine of around 3,000 Jews, who are located in the Baltic Countries. "Intourist" indicated that by organising this transit, it calculates on receiving hard currency earnings of around 900,000 rubles.

6 Sakamoto, *Japanese Diplomats*, 140, presents such claims in diplomatic correspondence, in particular, the American Ambassador to Moscow, Laurence Steinhardt, himself a Jew, who warned against issuing American entry visas.

7 Snyder, *Bloodlands*, 143.

8 Levine, *Sugihara*, 203–204. Levine was sued for his representation of Sugihara in 2002. At the time, he told the *New Zealand Herald*, "I'm still at a loss as to how I find myself in this incredible situation." (Adams, "Family split by book on Japan's Schindler.")

9 Shchadrin, "Vladivostokskii transit," 131–132.

During discussion of this question with the NKVD, Deputy People's Commissar Comrade Merkulov announced that there was no opposition on the part of the NKVD to the transit of the aforementioned Jews, since they will be conveyed across the territory of the USSR in special groups accompanied by guards.

When this matter was reported to you in 1939, you suggested declining the organisation of transit.

Recently the question about the transit of Jews through the USSR to Palestine has again arisen. The Plenipotentiary of the USSR in Lithuania communicated to us that the total number of Jews wishing to pass by transit through the USSR stands at around 3,000–5,000.

Intourist expenses would be covered by American and British Jewish philanthropic organisations, turning a black year for tourism into a profitable one.

Into this preexisting scenario, already under discussion among Soviet authorities, came Sugihara. In a brief interlude when Japanese relations with Germany were so good that, officially, Japanese officers could go anywhere in Germany and neighbouring areas, Sugihara held a series of postings at Japanese consulates along the Soviet Western border, classic observation posts. First came Helsinki in 1936, then Kaunas in 1939, then Prague, then Königsberg (now Kaliningrad), and finally Bucharest, where the Red Army detained him in 1945. As a diplomat-spy, Sugihara was expected to set up a network of informants.¹⁰ Arriving in Kaunas on 28 August 1939, Sugihara soon settled in right next to the dismemberment of Poland. Yale historian Timothy Snyder describes his job as “to follow German–Soviet relations.”

Lacking a staff of his own, he used as his informers and assistants Polish military officers who had escaped arrest by the Soviets and the Germans. He rewarded them with Japanese passports and the use of the Japanese diplomatic post. Sugihara helped the Poles find an escape route for their officer comrades. The Poles realised that it was possible to arrange a trip across the Soviet Union to Japan with a certain kind of Japanese exit visa. Only a very few Polish officers escaped by this route [...]

10 Shiraishi Masaaki covers Sugihara's background in intelligence in *Choho no tensai*.

At the same time, Jewish refugees began to visit Sugihara. These Jews were Polish citizens who had fled the German invasion in September 1939 [...] With the help of the Polish officers, Sugihara helped several thousand Jews escape Lithuania.¹¹

In addition to the Polish officers, Sugihara was aided by the Dutch acting consul Jan Zwartendijk's annotation in many Jews' official papers that no visa was required to enter the Dutch Caribbean possession of Curaçao, home to the oldest standing synagogue in the Americas. Zwartendijk was made Righteous among the Nations posthumously for providing Sugihara with the figleaf of a "final destination" for his *tranzitniki*.

Most of all, Sugihara was aided by Dekanozov, who, on July 25, after learning of Sugihara's willingness to sign Japanese visas, wrote directly to the Politburo asking for permission to arrange transit in exchange for gold. Instead of 3,000 to 5,000, Dekanozov now foresaw transit for only 800 Jews, who would travel in groups of fifty to 120. They all had visas and money, added Dekanozov, but their religiosity or professions made it undesirable to keep them in the USSR.¹² On 29 July 1940, the Politburo approved, making the Foreign Minister Molotov and the security chief Beria responsible for carrying the project to a successful conclusion. These two were also Dekanozov's present and former bosses. Of course, there was only one real "*Khoziain*."¹³ This is the top-down view on the Soviet side of the decision for "deportation to life" that brought thousands of Jews from the valley of the shadow of death to the North Pacific.

The years leading up to World War II are particularly difficult, with the tactical diplomatic manoeuvres of the immediate pre-war inexplicable as a product of ethics, values, or ideology.¹⁴ As such, they were largely written out of the postwar history books in both Japan and the USSR. The Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact was only the most visible symbol of this time of troubles, with the Soviet Union unable to "find" its copy until the end of the Soviet Union. Right up until his

11 Snyder, *Bloodlands*, 143.

12 "Dekanozov and Pozdniakov to TsK VKP(b), 25 July 1940," Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Sotsial'no-politicheskoi Istorii (hereafter, RGASPI), f. 17, op. 166, d. 627, l. 92.

13 "Reshenie Politbiuro, 29 July 1940," RGASPI, f. 17, op. 162, d. 28, l. 62. Others whom Stalin probably consulted included Foreign Trade Commissar A. I. Mikoian, the head of Intourist, and L. P. Kaganovich, the Transportation Commissar, in charge of the Trans-Siberian. They were all together in Stalin's Kremlin office on the evenings of July 25 and 27. Chernobaev, ed., *Na prieme u Stalina*, 308.

14 The following section on Japanese–German–Soviet diplomacy draws substantially on Wolff, "Chiune Sugihara."

death in 1986, Molotov refused to admit the existence of the secret protocols that had created spheres of influence between Stalin's Russia and Hitler's Germany, dooming the independent states in between. Only in 1993, with the Soviet Union extinct, would the secret protocols be published in Russian in Russia.

In hindsight and through the ideological lens, it was always clear that the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany could only reach transitory moments of non-aggression. Hitler and Stalin were locked in psychological battle long before their armies met, making the twenty months that separate 23 August 1939 from 22 June 1941 into a kind of "pre-war."¹⁵ It was this complex and secretive environment of temporary, tactical alignments that Sugihara was paid to monitor, since decisions made in the West would have important repercussions in the Far East. Most immediately, the signing of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact had been a slap in the face for Japan. Thus, in the late summer of 1940, as Sugihara moved into Kaunas, Japanese–German relations were in a period of uncertainty as Japan licked its wounds after the defeat at Nomonhan and the betrayal that underlay the German–Soviet non-aggression pact. As Molotov put it many years later,¹⁶

Stalin was a great tactician. Hitler indeed signed a non-aggression treaty with us without talking it over (*soglasovanie*) with Japan! Stalin forced him to do it. After that, Japan felt insulted (*obidelas' na*) by Germany and nothing came of their alliance.

Only the signing of the Tripartite Pact in September 1940, shortly after Sugihara's departure from Kaunas, would give renewed momentum to Tokyo–Berlin ties. Thus, there was little reason for Sugihara to provide even lip service to Nazi ideology, since the anti-Comintern pact had been neglected by the German side for more immediate benefits that only Stalin could offer.¹⁷

15 V.G. Dekanozov was always on the frontlines. On December 19, 1940, after completing the absorption of Lithuania, Dekanozov presented himself to Hitler as the new Soviet ambassador. Hitler told him that negotiations on improving Soviet–German relations would continue. On December 18, the day before, Hitler had given the order to prepare Operation Barbarossa, the attack on the Soviet Union. This brazen lie set the tone for Dekanozov's tour in Berlin (Roberts, *Stalin's*, 59). Also on that day, the first group of fifty Sugihara refugees left Kaunas escorted by an Intourist guide and headed for Moscow and Vladivostok.

16 Chuev, *Sto sorok besed s Molotovym*, 29.

17 Stalin mocked this irony at the banquet for Ribbentrop, offering a toast to "the new anti-Comintern man (*antikominternovets*) Stalin!" Chuev, *Sto sorok besed s Molotovym*, 19.

Instead, Sugihara continued to gather information by cultivating his Polish contacts to infiltrate both Soviet and German positions.

Thus, we should keep in mind that Sugihara's brief year of residence in Kaunas, tasked to spy on Germans while aiding thousands of Jews and Poles on the side, was not a moment of friendship between Japan and Germany but one of relative mistrust. This provided him leeway for his own operations.¹⁸

After Molotov–Ribbentrop, anything seemed possible, and Foreign Minister Matsuoka Yosuke argued for rapprochement with Moscow. Japan, having decided to focus on concluding the war with China while moving south to solve its resource problems, was now eager to conclude a non-aggression pact with the USSR. On November 15, Matsuoka invited the Soviet ambassador Konstantin Aleksandrovich Smetanin to his house for a heart-to-heart talk.

On arrival, Matsuoka immediately launched into a rhapsody on the similarities between the Russian and Japanese people. He then went on to prove his revolutionary credentials by showing how he had removed all those with sympathies for the Anglo-Saxon capitalists from positions of power inside the Foreign Ministry. But the Japanese were unwilling to hand back their concessions on northern Sakhalin, Stalin's minimum condition, so negotiations went no further.

Only in February, as data from the German ambassador suggested that Hitler was set on a course for war with the Soviet Union, did Matsuoka prepare for a trip to Berlin and Moscow. On the way, he stopped in Moscow, suggesting that further negotiations take place on the return trip. Once in Berlin, he must have been impressed both by the likelihood of the German attack but also Hitler's contradictory motives in encouraging a Japanese attack to the south, rather than keeping the Soviet's occupied in the north. With German blessings, he travelled back to Moscow to conclude a "neutrality" pact with Stalin, since an oral agreement recorded during the conclusion of the 1937 non-aggression pact between Moscow and Nanjing made it impossible for Stalin to conclude a "non-aggression" pact with Japan, which had been in a state of war with China since 1937.¹⁹

After three conversations with Molotov, the Soviet side remained non-committal, and Matsuoka went off to Leningrad to see the sights. On his return, a final meeting with Molotov resulted in no further progress. Only in the evening was Matsuoka summoned to Stalin in the Kremlin, where Stalin made clear that he understood this diplomatic act in its larger context:

18 In the spring of 1941, Sugihara was posted to Königsberg, where he wrote three telegrams stating the imminence of war between Germany and the USSR.

19 Slavinskii, *Pakt o neutralitete*, 69.

“The USSR considers it permissible, as a matter of principle, to cooperate with Japan, Germany and Italy on big questions (*po bol'shim voprosam*).” But with Hitler’s disinterest in “military aid” from other countries, there could be no question of a “quadripartite pact and cooperation with the Soviet Union on big questions,” so a neutrality pact would be not only a “first step, but a serious one, toward future cooperation on big questions.”²⁰

Matsuoka, ready to depart in failure, had succeeded! He was overjoyed and was taken drinking by correspondents, who delivered him drunk to his departing train, a regularly scheduled train with the Japanese delegation already aboard in a special first-class car. And then, the unthinkable occurred. In front of the whole world, i.e. the correspondents, who had accompanied Matsuoka onto the platform, Stalin showed up at the Iaroslavakii station. Stalin, who never awaited arrivals and never saw off departures, had come to honour Matsuoka’s achievement. The train’s departure was delayed for an hour. Stalin plied the Japanese diplomat with more champagne, and then he and Molotov “all but carried him [Matsuoka] aboard.”²¹

The year 1940 brought World War II to Western Europe, plunging the continent into the abyss and England into defiant isolation. Europe in flames was also bad news for Intourist, the Soviet government-directed company tasked with providing tourism and tourist facilities for foreign tourists and guests. The “Economic Overview of the Activities of the All-Union Stock Company Intourist for 1940” presents a dire view of what this meant for Intourist.

The military situation encompassing almost the whole capitalist world had a negative effect on the main activity of Intourist: the acquisition of foreign tourists from abroad and tourist in the literal sense of that word, while in 1940, travellers wishing to get to know the Soviet Union or rest in the USSR simply didn’t come. (*sovsem ne bylo*) [...] In 1940, Intourist’s offices in New York, Paris, and London were liquidated, as well as those in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, in connection with their incorporation into the Soviet Union.²²

A page later, the same shattering fact is repeated. The military situation had ended the influx of foreign tourists, “including those with the goal of getting

20 Ibid., 92.

21 Chuev, *Sto sorok besed s Molotovym*, 30.

22 “Economic Overview,” GARF, f. R-9612, op. 1, d. 66, l. 5.

to know the accomplishments of the first socialist country.” Nor were there any “individuals, groups, sanatoria-lovers or cruise tourists” visiting the USSR.²³

Amidst this general devastation, Intourist had only two continuing profitable lines. The first of these was business with Germany. That the Soviet Union would feed the German war machine was a *sine qua non* of the strange-bedfellows partnership between Bolshevik Russia and Nazi Germany. Huge quantities of petroleum products, grain, and metals travelled west from all over the USSR in large-scale trade operations organised by the Ministry of Foreign Trade.²⁴ The German businessmen, possibly doubling as spies, travelled all over the USSR as customers of Intourist, usually in first class. In 1938, only five percent of travellers had come from Germany, but in 1940, they counted for a full fifty-six percent.²⁵ The Trans-Siberian was an important route for the Germans, whether for business, spying or simply transit to China and Japan.²⁶ Over 3,000 Germans took this ten-day ride in 1940, as did twenty freight containers marked “steel objects” that turned out to be 2,000 Browning revolvers being sent to Japan and a mini-airplane broken down into components. This route was so important that, when the Soviets announced a tariff hike in spring 1941, the Germans complained bitterly and fought item-by-item for discounted freight rates.²⁷ The German business travellers also complained vociferously about being put in the same sleeping cars as Jews.²⁸

And, indeed, there were many Jews to run into, since the other profitable line for Intourist in 1941 was the provision of transit trips for emigrants and refugees with “the second Trans-Siberian route to Vladivostok” taking off in 1940, for the first time accounting for more than half of Intourist’s business as measured in “total days of visitor service.” Among these, 1,472 persons took the ten-day train ride to Vladivostok in 1940; only fifteen had taken this route

23 A similar collapse of tourism had taken place in 1937 in the wake of the show trials and the first wave of the Great Purges. There was a sixty-five-percent drop in foreign tourists compared to 1936. David-Fox, *Showcasing*, 303.

24 Lists of the main trade items and their volumes as sent by the Minister of Foreign Trade Mikoian to Stalin and Molotov can be found in Sevost’ianov, ed., *Moskva-Berlin*, 438–439.

25 David-Fox, *Showcasing*, 310.

26 The Germans, like the Japanese, had a consulate at Vladivostok. In October 1940, the German consul was briefly detained by Soviet guards after penetrating a “forbidden zone” near the radio transmitter of the Soviet Far Eastern Navy. Stalin and all top security officials received copies of this report. Sevost’ianov, ed., *Moskva-Berlin*, 523–524.

27 Sevost’ianov, ed., *Moskva-Berlin*, 527, 577–578, 643–647. German traveller statistics in “Economic Overview” GARF, f. R-9612, op. 1, d. 66, l. 49.

28 “Otchet za 1941 god” (hereafter, “Report for 1941”), GARF, f. R-9612, op. 2, d. 109, ll. 4–5, 10.

in 1939. Increasing slightly in 1941, the record was set for the largest number of short-term foreign visitors to Vladivostok between 1922 and 1991—indeed, for the whole Soviet period in the Russian Far East. Nonetheless, a leap from nothing to over a thousand visitors was a huge challenge for Vladivostok infrastructure, successfully met only in part, as we will see below. As Intourist’s “Economic Overview for 1940” stated, “from a small border transfer point, from the ship to the railroad and from the railroad to the ship, Vladivostok turned into a concentration point for large parties of transit passengers.”²⁹

Who were these transit passengers, Intourist’s new customers in 1940 headed for the North Pacific? They were the “Sugihara survivors,” each carrying the precious visa for life, permission from a Japanese official to board ships in Vladivostok harbour and to land in Japan, ostensibly on their way to Curaçao. None of them would see the Caribbean any time soon, but they would all see 1942, unlike most of the Jews of Kaunas and Lithuania, who would be exterminated in 1941.³⁰

The Israeli memorial Yad Vashem, dedicated to remembering individuals who made efforts to save Jewish lives during World War II, credits Sugihara with saving 2,100–3,500 lives.³¹ Intourist statistics seem to support the upper end of this range, but without providing a definitive number for the first months of 1941, since record-keeping became secondary once the Great Fatherland War began in June. The “Report for 1941” states that “as many as 1,500 transit passengers” went through Vladivostok in the first two months of 1941.³² Together with the 1,472 from 1940, this takes us close to 3,000. There were certainly more in March and April as well, as the boats to Japan held hundreds of passengers on each voyage. For example, as we will see below, the

29 “Economic Overview,” GARF, f. R-9612, op. 1, d. 66, statistics on l. 6 and citation on l. 10. The “Report for 1941” states that transit was “approximately” (*primerno*) ninety percent of Intourist business in 1941. “Report for 1941,” GARF, f. R-9612, op. 2, d. 109, l. 3.

30 It is estimated that ninety-five percent of Lithuanian Jewry was killed in the Holocaust, with eighty percent dead before the end of 1941. The Kaunas massacre of October 29, 1941, also known as the Great Action, was the largest mass murder of Lithuanian Jews. On this, see Wikipedia, “Kaunas massacre of October 29, 1941.”

31 Yad Vashem, “Chiune Sempo Sugihara.”

32 “Report for 1941,” GARF, f. R-9612, op. 2, d. 109, l. 2; “Akt (April 1941)” (hereafter, “Akt”), GARF, f. R-9612, op. 2, d. 117, l. 4 states that 2,986 transit passengers took the Siberian direction in the first quarter of 1941. We do not know how many of them went via Vladivostok and how many via Dairen, but if they all travelled to Vladivostok, that would mean that over 1,500 refugees took the boat to Tsuruga in March, producing a grand total of almost 4,500 in 1940–41. Intourist data cannot support any interpretation greater than this number.

Amakasu-Maru left Vladivostok on March 2 with 416 passengers on board. Although we are still unable to say exactly how many people were saved by transiting across Siberia, all of them were delivered from death to the North Pacific by Intourist. The next section of this article presents the Intourist view.

In Intourist materials, the travellers are almost never referred to as refugees but, rather, as “transit passengers” or “emigrants.” Their outstanding characteristic was that most of them travelled in third class all the way from the Soviet western reaches to its eastern seaboard. Although transit passengers had been a significant contingent on the Trans-Siberian railway already in 1938 and 1939, all traffic had travelled via Manchukuo rather than by the longer route to Vladivostok. In addition, the overall Trans-Siberian numbers increased steadily from 1,723 in 1938 to 2,511 passengers in 1939, peaking at 6,932 in 1940. Out of the total for 1940, 1,472 travelled to Vladivostok in third-class cars with open berths (not in enclosed compartments) for about fifty people.³³ Many, if not most, of these were emigrants with Sugihara visas.

Since all Trans-Siberian trains transited through Moscow, Intourist’s first challenge was getting them from Kaunas to the Soviet capital. Since the Japanese visas were being affixed just as Lithuania was being absorbed into the Soviet Union, it took several months for Intourist to come to grips with the situation. In particular, the border points changed in October as former crossings from Lithuania to Russia or Belorussia became internal stations. There was also still sporadic violence as final sparks of resistance were mopped up by NKVD squads and Red Army units. This must have slowed down departures for those who had just received the Sugihara visas, but they knew the visas would still be valid for a while and waited for the promised exit.

We do not know at what point Soviet authorities and Intourist became aware that there was such a large group of potential transit passengers. It is not impossible that Sugihara, in the week between his final entry to the list of 2,139 names on August 26 and his physical departure from Kaunas on September 4, handed a copy to whomever he had previously consulted on the sufficiency of a Japanese transit visa to get a Soviet transit document. Whenever the Soviet side became aware of the issue, by December 14, Intourist had a well-developed Preliminary Plan to Transport Emigrants from Lithuania. The planned number of emigrants was 4,000, of which 2,500 were to go to Vladivostok heading for Japan and the remainder to Odessa with a connection to Istanbul.³⁴ Below, we will limit our discussion to the Far Eastern direction.

33 “Economic Overview,” GARF, f. R-9612, op. 1, d. 66, ll. 70b, 10.

34 “Protokol Soveshchanie,” GARF, f. R-9612, op. 1, d. 59, ll. 159–161.

They had it all worked out. The trains that had been arriving late every day from Kaunas, unable to make the connection to Moscow, would now become through-trains to Moscow. Four Intourist employees travelled to Kaunas to set up an interim office and prepare daily departures of fifty emigrants, aiming at a total throughput of 1,250 persons per month. There, they sold pre-paid packages of train tickets, hotel accommodations, and boat passage in hard currencies. An additional four employees took turns escorting the daily trains to Moscow, where they were delivered from the Belorusskii Station to the New Moscow Hotel,³⁵ dedicated to third-class passengers, where hasty renovations were concluded the day the first group arrived.

The Trans-Siberian departed regularly from the Iaroslavskii Station, twice a week on Tuesdays and Fridays. It could easily accommodate the arriving “Lithuanians” as soon as their paperwork was ready. The real bottleneck would come in Vladivostok, where only one boat, the “Osaka-maru,” travelled thrice per month to Tsuruga, Japan’s nearest port. The boat trip took three days and two nights.³⁶ The whole plan was discussed and approved by a special meeting on the subject held by the Intourist Director’s Management Council. A member of the Intourist Board was sent ahead to Vladivostok “to create special conditions for sending the emigrants through Vladivostok.”³⁷

Year-end 1940 statistics for hotel occupancy show that 588 visitors stayed at the Novo-Moskovskaia, so almost exactly fifty per day coming from Kaunas.³⁸ Although the report noted that “transit passengers try to leave as quickly as possible,” many either took a tour of Moscow, since it could be organised at any daylight hour, or visited “various museums.”³⁹ They averaged two to three hotel nights in Moscow.

Third class on the Trans-Siberian was not a great experience. For ten straight days, the train went on and on. The first day out of Moscow, tea

35 Ibid. Although the New Moscow is clearly the lowest level, even the famous hotels came in for (self-) criticism: “The quality of the rooms and cleanliness of the public areas, etc. at the Metropol and especially in the Savoy left much to be desired. The Natsional was somewhat better than the Metropol, but also could not be called excellent.”

36 Eventually, an additional Japanese boat, the “Amakusa-maru” operated by JTB, would carry many of the refugees on its weekly voyages between Vladivostok and Tsuruga. A book about one of the Japanese young men who provided service on the boat describes his brief friendships with some of the refugees. It also reproduces articles from the Fukui Shimbun newspaper based in Tsuruga describing the boats as having 300–400 passengers on each voyage. Kitade, *Visas of Life*, 17, 47–49.

37 “Predvaritel’nyi plan,” GARF, f. R-9612, op. 1, d. 59, ll. 159–159ob.

38 “Economic Overview,” GARF, f. R-9612, op. 1, d. 66, l. 16.

39 Ibid., ll. 110b–12.

ran out, and then wood to heat the conductor's stove, on which the kettle should be kept boiling day and night. Food was bad; the menu never changed; napkins were filthy; delivery of orders was slow; personnel were rude. On one train, there were no electric lights for five days. At the end of the road waited the Hotel Cheliuskin, with "dirty toilets, bedbugs and cockroaches."⁴⁰ Such was Intourist's internal report on its own service, which it pronounced "absolutely satisfactory" (*bezuslovno udovletvoritel'nyi*).⁴¹

Others were more critical. The American diplomat Charles Bohlen was transferred from Moscow to Tokyo and brought a box of books and a box of food items on board the Trans-Siberian. His memoirs note that there were seventy-five Jewish emigrants on board with him. He was also not impressed by the Cheliuskin.⁴²

I also got a good look at Vladivostok, a typical Russian provincial town, with many log houses and snow piled in huge hummocks. The snow, the cold, the biting wind, the lack of elementary conveniences.

The fullest description of the whole operation appears in the annual report for 1940, oddly under the section entitled The Odessa Route (*Odesskoe napravlenie*). Opening with a note that no statistical data has been received on nationality, the passage continues with the only mention in the sixty-page report that Jews were among the refugees.⁴³

At the end of December 1940 (from 18.XII), a flow of foreign transit emigrants began to go through Moscow from the Lithuanian SSR.

These were almost all Jewish refugees from Poland with former Polish passports and Lithuanian safe-conduct papers, who had come to Lithuania during the German-Polish war and were waiting for a chance to leave. They are travelling mainly to Vladivostok and then on to the US, South American republics or Dutch colonies [...] From Dec. 18 to 31, 421 people arrived.

40 Ibid., l. 28.

41 "Akt," GARF, f. R-9612, op. 2, d. 117, l. 32; "Economic Overview," GARF, f. R-9612, op. 1, d. 66, l. 36.

42 Bohlen, *Witness to History*, 106–108.

43 "Economic Overview," GARF, f. R-9612, op. 1, d. 66, l. 5.

This is the only place in the long document where the Intourist clients are described as either Jewish or refugees.

Finally, the long train reached the Trans-Siberian's terminus, Vladivostok, a city on hills with a perfect harbour, the Golden Horn of the Far East. As the number of transit passengers began to increase steadily, Intourist took over the Cheliuskin in order to increase quality and cleanliness while bringing in many necessary items for both the rooms and the restaurant.⁴⁴ In general, Intourist was pleased with its performance. Most encouraging of all was the bottom line. A disastrous collapse of tourism and a worldwide loss of sympathy for the USSR had been neutralised (for Intourist) by developing the sole escape route for Europeans, especially Jews, fleeing the scene of war. The 1941 Intourist Annual Report proudly announced that "the general financial results of Intourist's work on the operations described must be considered satisfactory."⁴⁵ Among all the "measures taken to increase hard-currency (*valiutnye*) income in 1941," the very first was "a/the organisation of the transport of emigrants from the Lithuanian SSR in whole groups, which gave additional hard currency payments and sped up the operation."⁴⁶

Accounts of foreign currencies paid to Intourist, its main source of income, were compiled on 1 January 1942 and showed that the largest payment of the year was for \$78,800, transferred to the State Bank from the US as an advance payment for "emigrants from the Baltic." Money for this purpose also was deposited in English pounds, Norwegian kroners, German marks, Swiss francs, and Lithuanian lits.⁴⁷ The 1941 Report states that nearly 1,500 transit passengers were transported in the first two months of 1941 but that "later Japanese authorities began to block the transit, not allowing in even those passengers with visas in their passports from the Japanese consul in Kaunas [...]" The role of the Vladivostok transit began to recede, but not before the Soviets and Japanese faced off in a final test of wills.

In the months immediately preceding Foreign Minister Matsuoka's drunken victory, Sugihara visa groups moved out of Kaunas and across the Soviet Union, travelling a day to Moscow and ten days further to Vladivostok. Some went first class, some second, but most went in third class. They all understood that crossing the USSR was a matter of life or death. Those who did not

44 Ibid., l. 28.

45 "Report for 1941," GARF, f. R-9612, op. 2, d. 109, ll. 4-5; "Akt," GARF, f. R-9612, op. 2, d. 117, l. 42.

46 "Akt," GARF, f. R-9612, op. 2, d. 117, l. 42.

47 "Vedomost'," GARF, f. R-9612, op. 2, d. 110, l. 102.

understand and stayed in Lithuania, with rare exceptions, were either deported by the USSR or murdered by the Nazis a few months later. All winter, Jews crossed Siberia. Most took ship for Japan, but still there was a backlog that kept Intourist in business housing hundreds of emigrants at a time.

A letter from the Soviet Foreign Ministry to the Japanese Embassy on 1 February 1941 described the situation and requested transit through Manchukuo as well as direct trans-shipment to Japan from Vladivostok.

I called SAIDO (sic) and communicated to him that during the next 2–3 months a group of refugees will leave the USSR.

They are all heading to the Americas or Palestine and have refugee certificates, unexpired transit visas from the former Japanese consul in Kaunas and entry visas through Vladivostok and Manchuria.

Their exit exclusively through Vladivostok port will considerably delay their departure.

Wishing to meet the request of the refugees to quickly arrive at their permanent place of residence, we have a possibility to send them in two directions.

The Moscow embassy wanted to know more about this matter and the Soviet consular section provided these short answers:

1. The emigrants travelling in transit to the Far East and further are of various nationalities, but the overwhelming majority are Jews.
2. The total number of emigrants, that we desire to send by transit through Manchukuo, stands at 700–800 people.
3. All will travel as groups consisting of 50–100 people in March–April.
4. They all have travel tickets or money for travel.⁴⁸

48 Shchadrin, “Vladivostokskii transit,” 132–135.

There were other Jews taking this route, since other Japanese consuls had also been active, but none was so active as Sugihara, referred to directly in this exchange undertaken five months after he had finished issuing visas. As these refugees reached Vladivostok, many were questioned by the Japanese consular authorities. Some were denied passage; others boarded boats to Tsuruga in Japan but were not allowed to disembark. These imbroglios brewed in frigid correspondence between Soviet and Japanese consular officials, with Moscow insistent on exporting those who had already been transported across Eurasia. This internal report from the Foreign Ministry shows the development of the matter into March.

The Japanese consul in Lithuania, in August 1940, gave out a significant number of transit visas good for one year for Jewish refugee emigrants who were headed from Lithuania to America. Persons who received the Japanese visas headed to Vladivostok. From there, they were conveyed on ships to Japanese ports and then, after receiving American visas, were sent to America.

On 2 March this year the Japanese ship “Amakusa-maru” picked up 416 refugees in Vladivostok for their subsequent departure to America

On 13 March this year the ship “Amakusa-maru” arrived in the Port of Kobe where Japanese authorities did not allow ashore 74 passengers from the number of aforementioned refugees and ordered the captain of the vessel to send them back to Vladivostok. Meanwhile, in Vladivostok the instruction was given that henceforth such passengers not be sent to Japanese ports.

In connection with the refusal of the Japanese authorities to allow ashore 74 emigrants and a refusal to accept on board the ship a group of 100 emigrants, on 19 March, Deputy to the Head of the Consular Affairs Department Beliaev, according to the instruction of Comrade Lozovskii, summoned the Third Secretary of the Japanese Embassy in Moscow Hirooka and requested [...] taking appropriate measures in order that all emigrants having Japanese visas be given the possibility to continue the journey to their destination.⁴⁹

49 Ibid.

By April 9, the Japanese had backed down, and all émigrés had received passage to Japan as Matsuoka arrived in Moscow in search of Molotov's signature. At such a time, he would not have wanted to have any minor irritants, such as consular matters, interfere. It is this Moscow negotiation, Matsuoka's grand initiative and Stalin's dramatic agreement, that drove the final success of Sugihara's scheme linking Eastern Europe with the North Pacific in a mission of mercy.⁵⁰

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50 A good deed linking Europe and Asia was quickly repaid, as Soviet Far Eastern troops were soon transferred along the reverse route in the fall, saving Moscow in December 1941.

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