Chiune Sugihara: A Psychohistorical Study of a Rescuer of Jews during the Holocaust

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This article seeks to analyze the actions of Japanese diplomat Chiune Sugihara, a rescuer of Jews during the Holocaust, utilizing a personality model developed by social scientists Samuel and Pearl Oliner. The Oliners’s altruistic personality model centers on the idea that individuals who became rescuers have a distinct personality that responds to the complex interaction between three components: 1) the external circumstances they are confronted with; 2) internal characteristics that goad them into action; and 3) their ultimate decision to take action. Although no two-dimensional model is ever complex enough to capture the intimate complexity of a human personality, the Oliners’s model is ideal in “fleshing out” the personality of Sugihara as very little is known of the man beyond his rescue effort; he left scant written accounts of his life.

Introduction

What is a hero? A hero is many things to many people. To some, a hero is nothing more than a fictional character who possesses superhuman powers or someone who protects and serves their community. Then, there are those people who know a type of hero so rare and remarkable that they only emerge out of the darkest chapter of modern history; they are a brave group of extraordinary individuals simply known as rescuers. Although their descriptive name is simple, their actions were far from that; each one of these unique individuals risked their lives to help Jews escape the nightmare of Adolph Hitler’s Final Solution.

Since the emergence at the end of the Second World War of these accounts of unimaginable risk by seemingly ordinary
people, social scientists have sought to uncover the motivation of these supremely beneficent acts of compassion. Did these rescuers benefit financially from their rescue efforts? Or were they societal outcasts who empathized with these refugees fleeing from what amounted to a terrorist regime? Or were they simply motivated out of a narcissistic need for self-aggrandizement?

As the stories of rescuers continued to emerge, a husband-wife team of social scientists, Samuel and Pearl Oliner¹, sought to answer these questions about rescuers of Jews during the Holocaust. The Oliners interviewed rescuers and non-rescuers in an effort to identify a pattern of behavior that led some people to act and others to simply stand by and watch. Their research revealed a complex interaction between external circumstances the rescuers found themselves in, the internal characteristics of the individual rescuers and the way in which they chose to act. The Oliners defined this structure as “the altruistic personality.”

The theoretical model of the altruistic personality proposed by the Oliners becomes quite useful when trying to understand a rescuer by the name of Chiune Sugihara, a Japanese diplomat stationed in Kaunas, Lithuania in 1939 who, over the course of four months in 1940 issued as many as 10,000 Japanese transit visas to predominantly Polish Jews fleeing the horrors of the concentration camps and Hitler’s Final Solution.²

The Enigma of Chiune Sugihara

Before exploring the Oliners’s model in depth, it is important to first introduce the individual to whom it will be applied and why the application of the model is necessary to understand the man. Chiune Sugihara is a bit of a historical enigma. He was born in

Yaotsu, Japan on January 1, 1900. He was originally trained as a teacher of the Russian language at Harbin Gaukin, an institution of higher learning located in the former Chinese village of Harbin. It was at this time Sugihara showed his proficiency in learning languages; in addition to his native tongue of Japanese and his second language of Russian, the future Japanese diplomat also became proficient in German. In 1939, Sugihara was assigned to Japanese consulate in Kaunas, Lithuania; during his time there, he fulfilled his dual mission as an eastern European diplomat in the service of the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs by also serving as a spy, monitoring the movements of both the Soviet and German armies.

This dual existence was also apparent in Sugihara’s personal life; he was married twice, once to a White Russian by the name of Klaudia Apollonov and the second time to a Japanese woman by the name of Yukiko Kikuchi, with whom he had four children. Yukiko and three of their children were with him in Kaunas when Sugihara began the effort that would catapult him into the category of a rescuer. Despite all of his professional achievements as a scholar, a diplomat, and a rescuer, Sugihara left only a brief autobiographical sketch of his life; it provides little detail not only into his activities, but it also provides no additional insight into his personality and his motivations for rescuing the Polish Jews in Kaunas. Without any firsthand accounts to provide the information necessary to develop an authentic case study of Chiune Sugihara to uncover possible motivations for his rescue efforts, the Oliner’s altruistic personality model serves as an invaluable tool in developing a deeper understanding of not only the elusive Japanese diplomat, but, in a broader context, other rescuers as well.

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4 Levine, In Search of Sugihara, 54.
The Altruistic Personality & Chiune Sugihara: A Brief Summary of the Oliners’ Theory and Its Application

The structure of the altruistic personality as proposed by Samuel and Pearl Oliner consists of three major interacting components: the external circumstances the rescuer faces, referred to as “external circumstances”; the internal characteristics instilled in the rescuer over the course of their life, defined simply as “internal characteristics”; and the ultimate moment the rescuer moves from their stance of inaction to action, appropriately charged with the title of the “moment of action.” Each of these three components is further divided into a number of specific traits or circumstances that must be met or present in an individual for them to be considered having the distinct altruistic personality of a rescuer.

Figure 1: A visual representation of the Oliner model of the altruistic personality – Christina Perris

Oliner and Oliner, *The Altruistic Personality*, 113-222
The Altruistic Personality’s First Component: External Circumstances

The Oliners define four key external events as having aided a rescuer’s decision to take action: 1) “Information about and the comprehension of need,” 2) “Risk,” 3) “Material resources” and 4) “A precipitating occasion.”

According to the Oliners’s research, the rescuer first learns about the plight of the Jews either through their direct experience, a firsthand account or through a reliable source. The knowledge acts as a catalyst, forcing the rescuer to give the situation careful and deliberate thought. In the case of Sugihara, it was hard for him to ignore the need; the line of Polish Jews outside the Japanese consulate gates in Kaunas in March 1940 pled in mostly desperate silence of the need.

According to Sugihara’s second wife Yukiko, the sight of those desperate and dispossessed souls did not go unnoticed by the young deputy foreign minister. It was obvious by the “terror on their faces” these people had escaped something horrible; it was just Sugihara was not sure what they were escaping nor the much more important why. Determined to assess their need further and compelled by his duties as a diplomat, Sugihara sent one of the Poles who worked for him to get together a small group of “delegates” to speak for the large crowd. Amongst the representatives chosen was Zorach Warhaftig, the leader of the Polish Zionists, and later a key figure in the establishment of the state of Israel. The tale the small delegation told Sugihara was compelling; it outlined what the Polish Jews had already endured at Hitler’s hands and the bleak future that lie ahead if they were forced to remain in Lithuania or, worse still, if they were sent back to Poland where anti-Semitism had already begun to metamorphose into genocide.

7 Ibid., 113.
8 Sugihara, Visas for Life, 2-3.
9 Levine, In Search of Sugihara, 176.
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Sugihara’s response to the compelling argument makes it very clear he comprehended the need; a flurry of communications between the Japanese consulate in Kaunas and the Foreign Ministry’s headquarters in Tokyo indicates the level and depth of Sugihara’s comprehension of the need. At first, he approached finding a solution the only way he knew how, as an underling diplomat by appealing to those with more political clout. It would take something more to motivate Sugihara to take action.

The next criterion of external circumstances which impacted how or whether a rescuer decided to act was risk. The level of risk directly connected to Sugihara’s case is difficult to ascertain for a number of reasons. It is clear the Japanese government’s immigration policies during the early part of World War II were, only in appearance, very stringent. For example, one criterion called for anyone entering Japan to have a certain amount of money before they were permitted into the country. Despite this requirement, the Japanese government rarely held to this – or, for that matter, any – of their stringent immigration requirements by allowing anyone with paperwork that appeared to be in order to enter their country. Since the Japanese government appeared to violate its own immigration policy, then why would it turn around and prosecute a Japanese diplomat for doing the same? It would appear Sugihara was fairly “safe” from punishment if he decided to become a rescuer; however, Sugihara’s second wife Yukiko seems to contradict this viewpoint with her fear for “[their] lives, [their] future, Chiune’s job, everything.” Why, if Sugihara was safe from prosecution by the Japanese government, did his wife fear for their safety? Although it appears Yukiko’s fear was solely connected to Sugihara’s decision to help out the Jews, her concern for their family’s well-being might have actually been rooted in her anxiety over Sugihara’s role as a spy. This possibility is corroborated by Yukiko herself when she speaks of the first time Sugihara goes to the Soviet Embassy in Kaunas to seek approval of allowing the Jews to pass through Russia: “I was concerned about

10 Ibid., 63.
11 Sakamoto, Japanese Diplomats and Jewish Refugees, 48.
12 Sugihara, Visas for Life, 17.
his safe return from the Soviet Consulate because…I…knew that
the Russians perceived him as a high security risk.”¹³

The next criterion linked to the decision to respond were
the material resources the rescuer had available to him to aid in his
rescue effort. Sugihara’s authority and vested powers as the
deputy foreign minister were all the material resources he needed
to fulfill his role as a rescuer. With nothing more than many
strokes of a pen on a transit visa, Sugihara provided the
dispossessed men, women and children who found their way into
his office in the Japanese consulate with a way to begin a new life
in a safer land.

The most significant of the aforementioned criterion was
the last one: “a precipitating occasion.”¹⁴ The precipitating
occasion was literally the exact moment when the rescuer made the
conscious decision to transition from the inactive role of a
bystander to the active role of a rescuer. Each rescuer the Oliners
interviewed gave different responses as to what these precipitating
events were, but all had one common, underlying theme: they
struck at the deepest cord of the rescuer’s sense of humanity in
such a way that inaction became quite literally inexcusable and
unacceptable to the rescuer.

For Sugihara, this moment actually came in December
1939 when the Japanese diplomat and his family were invited by
eleven-year-old Solly Ganor to celebrate Hanukah with him and
his family.¹⁵ At this celebration, Sugihara not only got to see the
traditions and customs of the Jewish faith, but he also got to hear a
firsthand account of the horrible treatment and murder of the Jews
in Poland by a family who had made the decision to escape the
country before the killing of Jews began. Several participants at
the celebration that evening later commented on how Sugihara
appeared absorbed in the accounts of the Nazi atrocities.¹⁶ A few
days later, Sugihara made a statement to the family friend that

¹³ Ibid., 19.
¹⁴ Oliner and Oliner, The Altruistic Personality, 113.
¹⁵ Levine, In Search of Sugihara, 155-6.
¹⁶ Ibid., 156.
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nearly admitted his commitment to aid the Jews: “Tell your family and friends…the time to leave is now.”¹⁷

Although the Hanukkah celebration predated Sugihara’s rescue efforts, it is obviously the moment when Sugihara realized that inaction would no longer work. Sugihara continued to go through the proper bureaucratic motions to try to convince the Foreign Ministry of the need to rescue this group of persecuted people, but it was becoming very clear to him their response would be one of denial and indifference. It is very clear from even this earliest moment the young deputy foreign minister knew there was a high probability that in order for something to be done that he would have to take the initiative. Even at this early point, Sugihara demonstrated his commitment to the cause of rescuing the Jews when he agreed to help the dispossessed Mr. Rosenblatt from the Hanukkah celebration by stepping over his diplomatic bounds as deputy foreign minister and agreeing to help the Jewish refugee obtain a transit visa.¹⁸

The Altruistic Personality’s Second Component: Internal Characteristics

After identifying the external circumstances that prompted rescuers to act, the Oliners turned their focus inward as they sought to identify the character traits of the altruistic personality. Over the course of their research, they discovered five key characteristics linked to the altruistic personality: 1) “a sense of internal control”, 2) “stronger feelings of closeness to others”, 3) a “greater sense of responsibility towards others”, 4) a “heightened empathy for pain”, and 5) a “sense of inclusiveness”.¹⁹

The most abstract criterion of this component has to be the rescuer’s sense of inner control. “Inner control” is different from “self-esteem” in that the former deals with an inner sense of the self that is strong and well-defined by a set of fixed principles and

¹⁷ Ibid.
¹⁸ Ibid., 157.
¹⁹ Oliner and Oliner, The Altruistic Personality, 178.
the latter deals with how the person feels about himself.\textsuperscript{20} Sugihara possessed this trait as he had a strongly-defined sense of honor, which was instilled in him by his parents at a very young age. Both of the Japanese diplomat’s parents contributed significantly to the development of this sense of inner control; Sugihara’s mother could trace her family lineage back to the era of the \textit{samurai} and his father served in the Army in 1895 during the Sino-Japanese War.\textsuperscript{21} From these backgrounds dominated by the ideals of honor and duty, and the very close relationship Sugihara shared with both of his parents for most of his life, it is safe to say that the Japanese diplomat came to first imitate, then integrate these prized traits into his own personality; the characteristics that were demonstrated by his parents through their actions ultimately became the blueprint for the structure of his own personality.

The next trait present in the altruistic personality is “stronger feelings of closeness to others.”\textsuperscript{22} Sugihara obviously possessed this trait as evidenced by the close relationships he had to his family, his friends and strangers. As aforementioned, Sugihara was very close to his parents; this was a feeling of his that never changed despite the fact that his father had effectively disowned him for choosing to be a teacher rather than a doctor.\textsuperscript{23} In Japanese culture, filial piety is strongly practiced and the father’s wishes for his child’s future are always followed; no disobedience is tolerated. It is surprising that despite Sugihara’s open defiance of his father’s wishes for him to become a doctor, that their relationship was not permanently and irreparably damaged. In fact, towards the end of the elder Sugihara’s life, father and son were able to completely mend the rift the youthful Sugihara had created with his chosen career.

Of all the examples of these close relationships Sugihara had, the most surprising and vivid example of his sense of closeness with others would have to be the close relationship he maintained with his first wife, the White Russian, Klaudia

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 177-178.\
\textsuperscript{21} Levine, \textit{In Search of Sugihara}, 18.\
\textsuperscript{22} Oliner and Oliner, \textit{The Altruistic Personality}, 178.\
\textsuperscript{23} Levine, \textit{In Search of Sugihara}, 52.}
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Apollonov. Although the letters to substantiate her claims were kept to herself and not shared with author Hillele Levine, Klaudia claimed she remained in close contact with Sugihara clear up until a year before his death in 1986.24

Sugihara also possessed a greater sense of responsibility toward others, another internal characteristic defined in the Oliners’s model of the altruistic personality. In all areas of his life, he was obviously very conscious of this responsibility. His role as a diplomat charged him with the responsibility of representing the Japanese people in countries where a Japanese person more often than not had never been seen before; therefore, he was charged with the monumental responsibility of what amounted to the experience of first contact, where his conduct could possibly set the tone for diplomatic relations between Japan and the country in which he was stationed for decades to come. His role as a father and husband also charged him with the responsibility of overseeing the safety and welfare of his wife and children. Although these are common responsibilities that would not necessarily set Sugihara apart from anyone else, there is another experience in the Japanese diplomat’s life that might have deepened his sense of responsibility for others, especially the Jews: his commitment to his religion.

When Sugihara married his first wife, he converted to the Greek Orthodox Church, the same religion his first wife and her family practiced. Although Sugihara wrote nothing on his religious beliefs, he obviously held a deep connection to the faith as demonstrated when he married his second wife. Sugihara required his second wife to be baptized in the Greek Orthodox Church before they married.25 Given Sugihara’s obvious commitment to his new-found faith, it is clear he felt very strongly about many of the Christian doctrines imbued within the Church and, as evidenced by his later rescue efforts, compelled him to literally become “his brother’s keepers” when he chose to aid the Jews.

Sugihara also had a heightened empathy for pain. This next criterion of the altruistic personality was obviously instilled in

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24 Ibid., 71.
Sugihara when he lived in Harbin. During that time period, Sugihara witnessed the Chinese village become a refugee center for Jews fleeing the persecution of the highly anti-Semitic White Russians. It was also during this time that Sugihara was married to his wife Klaudia and living with her and her White Russian family. Although there are differing accounts as to whether Sugihara had any contact with any Jewish refugees during this time, it is not hard to make the jump in deductive reasoning that it is possible Klaudia’s family with their White Russian background might have shared their fellow countrymen’s feelings towards the Jews. As the situation deteriorated in Harbin, Sugihara became witness to the brutal executions and murders of the unwanted “burden” of Jews in the village by members of secret agents for the Japanese Army. Couple this experience with his wife and her family’s probable anti-Semitic fervor, it is clear to understand how Sugihara may have developed his heightened empathy for the pain of the Jews that resurfaced again when he was faced with the same faces deformed with the worry and terror he had witnessed years before in Harbin.

All the aforementioned traits of Sugihara tie into the final criterion of the internal characteristics of a rescuer, the all-important sense of inclusiveness. Although it sounds abstract in its definition, the Oliners simply mean by this phrase that a person has the ability to recognize everyone as human regardless of their physical, political, or religious differences. In addition to all the other aforementioned traits of Sugihara that demonstrate his ability to see Jews as equals, there is one additional trait that made Sugihara unique: it was his ability to be a “cultural chameleon.” Sugihara was described by several of his closest friends as being able to adapt his countenance and behavior to match his audience. When he would interact with a group of Japanese diplomats, Sugihara would be serious and sedate as he spoke Japanese; however, if a Russian acquaintance entered the room, the diplomat’s entire manner would change to one of warmth and joviality as he greeted the person in perfect Russian. Sugihara

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26 Levine, *In Search of Sugihara*, 54.
carried his role of a “cultural chameleon” into his interactions with the Jews by seeking out assistance to learn the Talmud.27

Sugihara’s Moment of Action

The final and most important component of the altruistic personality is how the rescuer chose to take action. There are two possible motivations: the normocentric motivation, in which the rescuers choose to respond because they feel they must act as others are expecting them to act, or the principled motivation, in which the rescuers act solely because they feel, based on their own principles, it is the right thing to do. Sugihara obviously fits the latter motivation as he clearly felt it was the right action to take. Sugihara did not feel he had to respond because others made him feel as though he had to; rather, he acted after he had given considerable thought to the situation, its risks and his responsibilities as a fellow human being. Sugihara’s reaction was not spontaneous, and he tried other routes available to him because of his position to get the Polish Jews the assistance they needed. When his efforts failed, he did not give up because he knew something had to be done for these refugees. According to his wife Yukiko, Sugihara knew he would never be able to live with himself if he turned his back on these souls in such desperate need of assistance. He also knew the cost to him and his family could be great.28 Nevertheless, he made the decision to help. The magnitude of his effort was immense. Over the course of five months between March and August 1940, Chiune Sugihara issued approximately 6,000 transit visas to mostly Polish Jews.29 These transit visas afforded their recipients the opportunity to leave Lithuania, travel across the Soviet Union, with their final destination being Japan.

27 Ibid., 158.
Conclusion

The altruistic personality model created by Samuel and Pearl Oliner is an exceptional tool in deconstructing the personality of a man as complex and elusive as Chiune Sugihara; however, as with any theoretical model, it provides only a clinical, two-dimensional model that is far too simplistic to understand the many complex facets of the human psyche. In the case of Chiune Sugihara, the Oliner model is a useful tool because Sugihara wrote virtually nothing of consequence as to the nature of his rescue efforts, his religious and/or political beliefs, and his own feelings about what the Jews endured at the hands of a man like Adolph Hitler. Without the Oliner model, a psychohistorical analysis of Sugihara would be nothing more than a collection of guesses and unsubstantiated conjectures. With the Oliner model, a social scientist can literally “flesh out” the skeleton of Sugihara’s personality and add dimension to this obviously remarkable, yet highly enigmatic man.
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Bibliography


Christina Alanne Perris is a graduating senior, earning her Bachelor of Arts degree in Public and Oral History from California State University, San Bernardino with highest honors. In the fall, Christina will begin her graduate studies at Claremont Graduate University, where she intends on pursuing several Master’s degrees and eventually a Ph.D. in history. Her fields of historical interest include Holocaust rescuers and understanding their motivations through existing social science constructs, Southern California railroading history and digitization techniques for management of archival collections.