

Beata SZUBTARSKA¹

THE AID OFFERED TO POLISH CITIZENS OF JEWISH ORIGIN IN THE FAR EAST IN THE YEARS 1940–1941

This article presents the activities of Polish organizations, especially the Polish Committee for Aid to the Victims of War, operating in the Far East during the Second World War. Its main concern is with efforts undertaken in support of Polish citizens of Jewish origin who embarked on a long journey outside Europe in search of refuge from the war. The basic research method adopted in the preparation of this article was the analysis of documents and reports left by the Committee. From the research conducted, I found out how over two thousand people—Polish citizens of Jewish origin—received help. Thanks to the commitment and devotion not only of members of the Committee mentioned above but also of the Polish diaspora and the Polish Embassy in Tokyo, over two thousand Polish refugees found shelter in Japan and then, after obtaining exit visas, traveled further to Canada, Palestine, Australia, Burma, New Zealand, South Africa, the United States of America, South America, or Shanghai. The Committee also provided them with material aid. The help and support they received allowed them to reach a place of safety away from the war and start afresh.

Keywords: The Polish Committee for Aid to the Victims of War in Tokyo, the Embassy of the Republic of Poland to Japan, the Second World War, the Holocaust, the Polish-Jewish relations.

1. INTRODUCTION

‘He who saves one life, saves the world entire’. These words, taken from Talmud, are used as a motto of Yad Vashem. They also appear on the most important Israeli medal – the Righteous among the Nations. The list of those to whom it has been awarded contains the names of twenty six-thousand silent heroes who saved Jews from the Holocaust, including over six thousand names of Polish citizens thanks to whom many Jews survived, and in Poland, as nowhere else in Europe, the help to which they owed their lives was punishable by death. There is no doubt that the list doesn’t contain the names of many other people from all over the world who, despite the fear they felt and the danger in which they put themselves and their loved ones, chose to offer their help to those who were in need of it. This article deals with some of them. My aim here is to give an account of the assistance which Polish citizens of Jewish origin received during the Second World War from members of the Polish Committee for Aid to the Victims of War in Tokyo and of other

¹ Beata Szubtarska, DSc PhD, Jan Kochanowski University of Kielce, Institute of International Relations and Public Policies, Uniwersytecka 15, 25-406 Kielce; e-mail: szubtarska@ujk.edu.pl. ORCID 0000-0002-2167-3787.

Polish organizations in the Far East. The story of their efforts and their dedication certainly deserves to be told.

2. ESTABLISHING THE COMMITTEE

As early as the beginning of 1940 I received word from German Jews who were travelling across Japan that large groups of Polish Jews from the region of Wilno and Kowno were preparing to flee, and that the route they were going to take ran through Japan. The first refugees who had managed to escape their persecutors in Lithuania began to arrive in Japan in the summer of 1940. The incorporation by the Soviet Union of Lithuania and the Wilno region had the effect of making an ever-increasing number of disorganised groups of both Polish and Jewish inhabitants decide, after a brief period of confusion and hesitation, to set off in the direction of the Far East as the only avenue of escape from misery, persecution or deportation to Kazakhstan (LAC, Vol. 2, 1941).

Refugees' journey from the region of Kowno and Wilno to Japan was made possible by visas and certificates issued by Japanese consul Sugihare Chiune (1900–1986) (Pałasz-Rutkowska, Romer, 1996) and his Dutch counterpart Jan Zwartendjik (1893–1976). Relying on the help and papers from foreign diplomats, refugees travelled by train through Siberia to Vladivostok and then by ship to Japan. It is worth noting that there were thousands of people whom both diplomats, putting their own lives at risk, helped entirely selflessly.

According to records from the Polish diplomatic mission in Tokyo (Szubtarska, 2014), between August 1940 and February 1941, 740 Polish citizens arrived in Japan. Over 95% of them were of Jewish origin. All of them needed support. During the first few months they received help from members of the Polish diaspora and of the Polish diplomatic mission in Tokyo, but this support quickly proved insufficient. 'The embassy, understaffed due to the war-related budget cuts, wasn't prepared to fulfil its new consular obligations, especially on such a scale. The Polish colony in Japan, small and not well-off, wasn't able to fully discharge the task, and there was a general scarcity of means. No less negative was the fact that the number of refugees likely to arrive wasn't known beforehand, even roughly, and that the Soviet exit regulations and the visa rules of foreign states underwent constant changes. Refugees travelled on papers which were usually insufficient to confirm their Polish citizenship and marital status, and without resolving these issues as well as without examining their political loyalties, often put under pressure from the Soviet intelligence, they couldn't continue their journey. The fact that refugees arriving in Japan had no cash resources made it necessary to obtain some funds to meet their basic needs and to cover the cost of sending expensive telegrams and completing various formalities in foreign consulates' (LAC, Vol. 2, 1941).

It quickly turned out that the situation of the refugees in the Far East required the organization of a broad support system. In the autumn of 1940, on the initiative of the Embassy of the Republic of Poland and the Polish diaspora in Japan, the 'Polish Committee for Aid to the Victims of War' was established. Its first concern was to offer help to all Polish citizens regardless of any differences among them. During the first days of its work, the Committee, which installed itself in the buildings of the Polish Embassy, encountered a number of financial and formal difficulties.

Zofia Romer (1897–1981), wife of the Polish ambassador to Japan (Szubtarska, 2012), was appointed head of the newly established organization, Klemens Zyngol took charge of its refugee section (member of *American Joint Distribution Committee*), and Paulina

Zikman, wife of the greatest Polish industrialist in Manchukuo, became its treasurer. The Committee's board also included Karol Staniszewski, Aleksander Piskor (the embassy's workers), Stefan Romanek and Natalia Szcześniak, wife of a contract agent. The activity of the Committee was regulated by the charter confirmed by the Polish Embassy as the supervisory body and was subject to the authority of the Audit Committee set up by ambassador Romer and composed of three members: Colonel Jerzy Levittoux (chairman), Władysław Kuncewicz and Fryderyk Tabaczyński.

In September 1940, soon after its formal establishment, the Committee set to work procuring funds from abroad to help refugees, an unexpectedly great number of whom, usually without any material means, was pouring into Japan, belying initial predictions regarding them. In pursuing its goal, the Committee established cooperation with Jewish organizations in Japan, with *American Joint Distribution Committee* and with East European *Committees for Assistance to Jewish Immigrants from Eastern Europe*. The aid effort was also supported by the Polish diaspora in the Far East.

3. ORGANIZATION OF AID

In January 1941 increasingly large groups of refugees began to flow into Japan, which led the Committee to establish its units in Kobe and Yokohama. Refugees also became involved in the relief work.

Once it was established and the refugees came pouring in, the Committee focused its attention on:

- Passport and papers assistance.
- Emigration assistance.
- Care and material aid.

It quickly transpired that many refugees had either inadequate or invalid papers. Weeks were spent in trying to put these issues, crucial for refugees' future, in order. The staff shortage, the number of matters handled by the Committee and professional inadequacy of many of its members hampered the efforts it was taking in the field in question. Papers of all refugees required, if not complete exchange, then at least extension. Only few refugees had passports issued in Poland, most were equipped with certificates from the Department for Polish Affairs in Kowno and these had to be exchanged for passport books or for certificates from the Consular Section of the Polish Embassy in Tokyo.

The strict registration of all refugees and the settlement of all issues regarding their papers, carried out with a view to facilitating their departure from Japan, called for a collaborative effort of many people. To understand the extent of the refugees' needs, dry numbers alone aren't enough, one has to interpret them. In a short time a dozen or so people had to prepare a variety of documents (passports, birth certificates, morality certificates) for 2185 refugees. The Committee's members could count on the help of two people sent by the Polish Embassy in Tokyo. It was also agreed that in matters relating to various documents the Committee would serve as a link between the refugees and the consular section of the Polish Embassy. Under the arrangement, the Committee would accept refugees' applications at its offices in Kobe and Yokohama and then pass them on to the embassy's consular section, along with information about refugees' profession, age and family relations. In carrying out these tasks, it received support from the Polish Doctors Association, the Polish Engineers and Technicians Association, the Polish Lawyers

Association, the Jewish Agency and the Polish Branch of the Bund (all of these organizations were of course based in Japan).

The Committee's first step was to send one of its members to the harbour. Polish citizens who arrived there were given assistance in completing all entry formalities and were then sent to Kobe where the local Jews had prepared special rooms to accommodate several hundred people. Those few refugees who arrived directly in Tokyo were lodged on the premises of the Polish Embassy. Newcomers were offered guidance and financial aid. The Committee's members carried out initial registration and, when need arose, intervened on behalf of their fellow countrymen with maritime transportation companies.

The next step consisted in providing Polish refugees with final-destination visas. Efforts undertaken to help Polish citizens leave Japan and go somewhere safer can be considered the most important part of the Committee's activity. In dealing with immigration issues, its members prepared all kinds of documents for the Polish Embassy and acted as an intermediary between foreign consulates and Polish citizens with regard to visa matters.

In the task of securing permits allowing refugees to stay in Japan until they were provided with exit visas, the Committee cooperated with the Committee for Aid to Refugees attached to the Jewish Commune in Kobe.

It must be emphasised that it was impossible for Polish refugees to remain in Japan, since the country was already on the side of Poland's enemies and Polish citizens faced the threat of ending up in concentration camps. Besides, Poland promised that they would leave immediately after a safe refuge was found for them somewhere else (the transit visa allowed them to stay there for ten days).

The help from the Polish Embassy increased the efficacy with which the Committee handled visa issues, which involved specifying the order in which individual refugees were to leave Japan, and the country to which they were to go. This specification depended on refugees' professional skills and on the possibility of obtaining visas for them. The offices in Kobe and Tokyo prepared information about their age, family relations, education and profession. The Committee's members received support in this regard from the Polish Doctors Association, the Polish Engineers and Technicians Association, the Polish Lawyers Association and the Jewish Agency representing Zionist organizations from Poland and the Branch of the Polish Bund.

During the first months of the Committee's work it seemed that it would suffice to rely on contacts with the British to solve visa problems, but, as we know, refugees were steadily increasing in numbers. Once there were more than eight hundred of them, it became clear that it would be necessary to look for other destinations. Handling visa issues was made more difficult by the restrictions imposed on immigration by the United States and by South American countries. Here again the Polish Embassy in Japan came to the rescue.

At the end of January, the first talks, attended by heads of both embassies, representatives of the Australian legation and *chargé d'affaires* of Canada, were held in the English Embassy. The next meeting took place at the beginning of February. In his account of it, the Polish ambassador to Japan wrote: In my conversations with the Allies I tried to treat this Far East task as a separate issue, one requiring a special solution, directly unconnected with the way this kind of problems were dealt with in other areas, of which my knowledge was too poor to talk about them. I get the impression that my arguments pertaining to local conditions persuaded my colleagues of the inevitable necessity of doing 'something' for us and ensured them that this 'something' wasn't too difficult to achieve' (LAC, Vol. 2, 1941). As a result of these negotiations the Polish Embassy secured 300

hundred visas to be used by Polish citizens during the wartime years. The documents enabled another group of Poles to go to Canada, Palestine and South and Central America.

The Committee's activity was soon extended to include all the efforts taken by refugees to obtain visas to the United States and South American countries. The Committee also established cooperation with the Kobe-based Jewish Agency. Both organizations worked together to help refugees having Palestinian visas get to Palestine. Much of the help the Committee received came from Józef Epstein from Warsaw and Rozowki from Kowno, both of whom were representatives of the Hicen Society from the United States in Japan. After becoming acquainted with the plan of the evacuation of refugees and presenting the Head Office in New York with relevant information, they were ordered to establish the Hicen Section in Kobe. The help from this organization actually eliminated the problem of covering refugees' travel expenses.

Efforts regarding emigration issues included the health screening of those refugees who were applying for visas to one of the countries of the British Empire. Helpful in this regard were of course doctors from the Polish Doctors Association.

In his report to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Polish Ambassador in Tokyo gave the following account of the activities pursued by the Committee and the Embassy: 'to relieve refugees of the necessity of travelling in large numbers from Kobe to Tokyo in order to complete passport formalities (nine-hour trip by fast train), which was very expensive and inadvisable in terms of police regulations, I ordered respective officials from the consular section of the Embassy to install themselves in the building of the Honorary Consulate in Osaka (half an hour from Kobe) and work there for a few days after the arrival of each new transport of Polish refugees. The latter's papers, needing processing, are taken to Tokyo, which is also a destination of some of our refugees whose presence in the capital is necessary. The circumstances have forced me to increase the number of staff members for a period of the heavy workload (...) the tactic employed by the embassy in dealing with the difficult problem of distributing Polish refugees was a) to draw first on our own resources, such as our staff's family and personal relations, already available visas and other possible options, b) to use the influence wielded by Jewish Organizations and by the Polish Committee for Aid to the Victims of War, which allowed us to extend the range of our activities outside Japan, to distant countries, and c) only finally to send the embassy's recommendations to foreign diplomatic and consular posts or to Polish embassies in other countries' (LAC, Vol. 2, 1941). In this way, by January 1941, we had managed to dispatch 300 hundred people to a dozen or so countries. The most, that is, 142 of them went to the United States, 43 to Palestine and 35 to Canada.

The third plank of the Committee's activity concerned the provision of material support to Polish refugees in the Far East. It should be noted that 75 per cent of the Committee's budget came from the *American Joint Distribution Committee*. Donations from this institution accounted for the lion's share of the committee's funds.

The material aid offered by the Committee aimed to cover the cost of living in Japan and of leaving Japan. The Committee at the Jewish Commune in turn provided refugees with temporary accommodation and money allowances. Worth noting is the fact that various groups of refugees such as rabbis or rabbis' apprentices were lodged in separate houses in consideration of their different habits and lifestyles.

Relying on the help of both local doctors and those recruited from among refugees themselves, the Committee organized medical aid in every refugee centre in Japan, using its own funds to pay doctors for their work and to cover the costs of medical treatment.

The work of the Committee and the Polish Embassy was interrupted in October 1941, after Japan broke off diplomatic relations with Poland (I shall return to this issue later).

As indicated in the financial statement covering the period from 5 September 1940 to 17 October 1941 the total amount of money raised by the Committee was 120.805.67\$, of which most, that is, 65.116.03\$ was donated by *Joint Distribution Committee*. However, worthy of mention are also contributions made by Polish refugees (9.142\$) and the Polish diaspora in the United States (8.488.06\$). The total of 120.196.09\$ was distributed, of which 83.764.08\$ were spent in support of refugees, including loans (27.645.66), money allowances (26.999.86), medical treatment (1.883.99), visa fees (3.902.07), travels (15.305.72) and telegrams (8026.78). Administrative expenditures amounted to 8.714.23\$ (IPMS, MSZ A.11.E/817). By 17 October 1941, 2185 Polish refugees had moved into Japan (97 percent of them were Jews) and 2077 left it. Their main destinations were as follows:

1. The British Empire – 634 people, including Canada 259, Palestine 210, Australia 84, Burma 35, New Zealand 31, South Africa 9, Great Britain 3, Egypt 3.
2. The United States – 502 people
3. South America – 166 people
4. Shanghai – 764 people
5. Other countries – 11 people (IPMS, MSZ A.11.E/817).

It is difficult to overestimate the role which all of the institutions discussed here played in the lives of Polish citizens, mainly of Jewish origin, who travelled from Wilno to Tokyo to receive help and to survive. This is how their experiences were described by one of the survivors: ‘And as we were leaving Japan – some to join the army (which was kept secret), some to reunite with their families or friends and some to venture into the unknown, “in search of bread” – we were always accompanied by someone from the Embassy who bade us farewell at the harbour and who wished us a good journey. It is perhaps for this reason that it seemed as if we were leaving behind someone who was very close and dear to us, almost an immediate family member. And this was the success of our embassy, of ambassador Romer and his entire staff. Nobody who stayed in Japan at that time would forget “*Porando Taiszikan*”. In truth, it wasn’t just an office. Rather, it was a home, a shelter for wanderers, a clinic for the sad and worried, treating all kinds of troubles, finding means of living, obtaining visas, tickets, transportation, permits and a variety of minor things that can’t even be mentioned here. And one more thing. Poland was there, and this is most important’ (*Porando Taiszikan...*, 1943).

4. SUMMARY

After closing the Embassy Japanese authorities decided to transfer all Polish refugees who were still in Japanese territory to Shanghai. Consequently, towards the end of 1941, 946 Polish citizens, mainly Jews, including 151 women and 86 children, appeared in this Chinese city, occupied by Japan at that time (LAC, Vol. 2, 1942). About one hundred of them had already obtained asylum visas but couldn’t set out for their respective destinations because Japan suspended ship connections before going to war against the United States. In a telegram sent to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in November 1941, Romer wrote: ‘The biggest trouble will be with a group of about 350 rabbis and their apprentices who are going to be lodged together with no prospect of employment. I believe that only pressure from American Jews can help here. I am going to work towards this goal (LAC, Vol. 2, 1942).

The task of organizing aid for this large group of Polish citizens was taken up by Romer who arrived in Shanghai on 1 November 1941, having been appointed ambassador of the Republic of Poland to the Special Mission in the Far East in Shanghai. The task wasn't easy, especially after the outbreak of war in the Pacific. The fact that maritime passenger traffic was brought to a halt made it impossible for many refugees to take advantage of their visas and reach safety in countries that weren't engulfed by war. This situation also hampered the transfer of financial resources used to meet the needs of Polish citizens, which made it necessary for Romer and his staff to look somewhere else for support. However, the effects of their efforts were very impressive.

Polish citizens could count on the help of not only the *Joint* but also of institutions they themselves created with the support of the ambassador. There was the *Polish Aid Society* operating in Shanghai, a care organization composed of local Polish Jews and using only Polish funds. The Polish Embassy and the Committee played a significant role in organising kitchens, sewing plants, small businesses, English courses, medical treatment, loan institutions and the like. The same kind of activity, but based on foreign source income, was also pursued by 'Ort' (*Society for Promotion of Handicrafts and Agriculture for News in the Far East*), a kind of craft school for Jewish refugees. Men received training as carpenters, electrotechnicians, car mechanics and drivers while women as tailors and corsetieres.

Also important was the role of the Care Council. Containing representatives of all Polish organizations in Shanghai, it met to discuss matters that were particularly important for refugees.

The General Board of the Union of Poles in China was established with the consent of the Japanese authorities. Its task was to continue efforts aimed at helping Polish refugees. It was assumed that the Board would represent their interests before the Japanese occupation authorities.

It is difficult to estimate all the aid efforts undertaken by the institutions dealt with here. They can certainly be given credit for helping a great number of people go to Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Mexico, Palestine and the United States, and for helping those who remained in Shanghai survive the war. Refugees were reported to quickly adapt to new life conditions, especially in Burma, Australia, Canada and New Zealand. They were able to find employment and start earning their living (IPMS, MSZ A.11.E/817). Their help also allowed students of the rabbinical school in Wilno to leave the city and go to the United States, which was a significant accomplishment. Although, as I have already mentioned, social activity undertaken in support of Polish refugees in the Far East in the years 1940–1941 is difficult to assess, there can be no doubt that those who were involved in it should be posthumously honoured – at least by the memory about their devotion.

REFERENCES

- Ambasada Polska opuszcza Tokio* (1941). „*Dziennik Związkowy*” (Chicago), 6 XII 1941 r.
„*Dziennik Polski*” (Londyn), 25 I 1943.
Library and Archives Canada, T. Romer fonds, (MG31-D68), Vol. 2, file Japan January–April 1941.
Levine, H. (2000). *Kim pan jest panie Sugihara*, przekł. S. Gąbiński. Warszawa: Krajowa Agencja Wydawnicza.

- Pałasz-Rutkowska E., Romer A. T. (1994). *Współpraca polsko-japońska w czasie II wojny światowej. (Kowno, Sztokholm, Królewiec i Berlin 1939–1944)*. „Zeszyty Historyczne” (Paryż) No. 110.
- Pałasz-Rutkowska, E., Romer, A. T. (1996). *Historia stosunków polsko-japońskich w latach 1904–1945*. Warszawa: Bellona.
- Porando Taiszikan. Wilno – Moskwa – Władywostok – Tokio. Dom rodziny tułaczy polskich w Japonii* (1943). „Dziennik Polski” (Londyn), 29 I 1943.
- Szubtarska, B. (2014). *Niezwykłe misje. Tadeusz Romer (1894–1978). Dyplomata RP w świecie dyktatur i wojen*. Piotrków Trybunalski: Naukowe Wydawnictwo Piotrkowskie.
- Szubtarska, B. (2012). *Z wizytą u cesarza. Opowieść dyplomatyczna Zofii Romer*. Piotrków Trybunalski: Naukowe Wydawnictwo Piotrkowskie.
- The Polish Institute and Sikorski Museum (IPMS), MSZ A.11.E/817.

DOI: 10.7862/rz.2021.hss.09

The text was submitted to the editorial office: April 2020.

The text was accepted for publication: March 2021.