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An Unsung Hero: Setsuzo Kotsuji
The Japanese Professor Who Rescued Thousands of Jews

Yoshiji HIROSE※

自らの命を賭して1940年に2139通の「日本通過ビザ」をユダヤ難民に発行した杉原千畝の業績は世界各地で認められ、映画にもなりよく知られている。しかし、外務省の命令に反して発行されたビザがなぜ有効なものとして扱われたのか。ユダヤ人がどのようにして日本に上陸し、また数か月に及ぶ日本での生活と、その後いかにして出国できたのかは長い間私の疑問であった。その疑問に答えてくれたのが小辻節三氏の存在である。聖書ヘブライ語学者であり、60歳という高齢になりユダヤ教に改宗した小辻節三博士の個人史を調べることで、その業績を踏まえて本論では、彼の学問の過程と、ユダヤ学との出会いを中心に吟味していきたい。

キーワード: 聖書ヘブライ語, 反ユダヤ主義, イディッシュ語

I

Dr. Timothy Snyder of Yale University argues in his recent book Black Earth: the Holocaust as History and Warning (2015):

The claim of a "right" to destroy the world in the name of profits for a few people reveals an important conceptual problem. Rights mean restraint. Each person is an end in himself or herself; the significance of a person is not exhausted by what someone else wants from him or her. Individuals have the right not to be defined as parts of a planetary conspiracy or a doomed race... Understanding the Holocaust is our chance, perhaps our last one, to preserve humanity... Perhaps it is true that to save one life is to save the world. But the converse is not true: saving the world does not restore a single lost life... The evil that was done to the Jews—to each Jewish child, woman, and man—cannot

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be undone. Yet it can be recorded, and it can be understood. Indeed, it must be understood so that its like can be prevented in the future. (Snyder 340-41)

As he suggests here, we have to learn from the Holocaust and consider it a warning, even when we examine the intentions of Holocaust rescuers, because there are “grey saviors” who did rescue Jews, but for their own interests, like Oskar Schindler at the outset.

Chiune Sugihara, Japanese consul in Lithuania in 1940, rescued about 6000 Polish Jews by issuing Japanese transit visas at the risk of his life and even that of his family. In fact, his name was on a Nazi assassination list. Sugihara described the source of his righteous actions in his memoir, “as my sense of humanity, from love for my fellow human beings” (Snyder 259). These remarks resound with Snyder’s conclusive assertion.

Dr. Setsuzo Kotsuji is another less-known Japanese civilian Holocaust rescuer. Setsuzō Kotsuji (1899-1973) was born in 1899, one year before Chiune Sugihara, as the son of Shinto priest who descended from a long line of Shinto priests in the famous Shinto temple Shimogamo Shrine in Kyoto. From childhood, he was expected to be a Shinto priest; however, instead he came to be interested in the study of Biblical Hebrew, and eventually became a Japanese Jew.

Before I examine Kotsuji’s life more closely, I would like to briefly introduce Japanese history and its religion in order to make clear Kotsuji’s particular upbringing and his family tradition of Shintoism.

Shintoism is the indigenous religion of the people of Japan. It is defined as a religion focused on ritual practices to be carried out diligently, to establish a connection between present-day Japan and its ancient past. Shinto practices were first recorded and codified in the written historical records of the Kojiki and Nihon Shoki in the 8th century. Still, these earliest Japanese writings do not refer to a unified “Shinto religion,” but rather to a collection of native beliefs and mythology.

The Kojiki is a collection of myths concerning the origin of the four home islands of Japan and the Kami, Japanese gods. Along with the Nihon Shoki, the myths contained in the Kojiki are part of the inspiration behind many practices. Later, the myths were re-appropriated for Shinto practices, including the misogi purification ritual. In many ways, the Kojiki and the Nihonshoki have several affinities with the Old Testament. They are filled with local traditional beliefs and mythology, and they are comparable to the world of the Old Testament. Most probably, as a little boy, Kotsuji unconsciously felt some similarities between his own upbringing in traditional Shinto belief and the world of the Old Testament.

Shinto is the largest religion in Japan, practiced by nearly 80% of the population, yet only a small percentage of these identify themselves in surveys as “Shintoists.” In Japan, most of the Japanese, without belonging to an institutional “Shinto” religion,
attend Shinto shrines and beseech *kami*, Japanese for "God," on many occasions, such as the celebrations of child-birth, marriage ceremonies, and prayer for the success of the entrance exams for famous schools or universities. Since there are no formal rituals to become a member of "folk Shinto," "Shinto membership" is often estimated by counting those who join organized Shinto sects. Shinto has 81,000 shrines and 85,000 priests in the country.

In 1882, after many years of careful planning and hard work, a committee of Protestant missionaries and Japanese Christian converts completed a Japanese translation of the Old Testament. Even now, Jews are a tiny ethnic and religious group in Japan, presently consisting of only 2000 people. Few Japanese, even among academic people, are familiar with the Old Testament and the New Testament and can tell the differences between Judaism and Christianity. As a result, Japan had no traditional anti-Semitism until Nazi ideology and propaganda influenced a small number of Japanese military personnel in the 1930s and 40s.

Saved by Mr. Sugihara, about 5000 Polish Jewish refugees came to Kobe with transit visas that would allow them to stay in Japan for only 15 days. The man to whom the Jewish community in Kobe turned was Hebrew scholar Setsuzo Kotsuji. Dr. Kotsuji was informed about what Mr. Sugihara did for Jews against the order of Japanese Foreign Minister Matsuoka. Dr. Kotsuji helped with the refugees' daily needs, repeatedly negotiated with the Foreign Ministry as well as local governments at his considerable personal expense to win visa extensions for them, and successfully arranged the departure of nearly all of them to new destinations by the fall of 1941.

Dr. Kotsuji also fought against persecution of the Jews by writing books and giving lectures throughout the country. In the fall of 1944, this resulted in his being arrested and tortured for violating wartime speech restrictions. Thanks to a quick-witted friend, he won release, but fearing for his safety, he moved with his family to Manchuria in June, 1945. He greeted the end of the war there, aided by some of the Jews whom he himself had helped save. After the war he converted to Judaism and found his final resting place in Jerusalem.

I would like to investigate why Dr. Setsuzo Kotsuji dared to risk his life to save many Jewish refugees from Poland, who were first rescued by Chiune Sugihara, and at the age of sixty what brought him to his decision to be a Japanese Jew to accept circumcision in Jerusalem. To examine Kotsuji's life will contribute to understanding his strong attachment to Judaism, and certain similarities between Japanese religious feelings and Judaism.

Dr. Kotsuji's memoir, *From Tokyo to Jerusalem* (1964), starts with the moment when he became a Japanese Jew:

It was September 20, 1959. I lay on the operating table of the Sha'rei Zedek Hospital in Jerusalem. Dr. Nahum Cook stood at my side, a scalpel in his
hand, prepared to perform the ritual of circumcision.

“What am I doing here?” I asked myself. “I am sixty years old, a Japanese, the descendant of a long line of Shinto lords, priests of the Imperial Household of Japan. What brought me to this place? Why did I come to this one spot in the world, surmounting such odds as few men have surmounted in a lifetime?” (Kotsuji preface)

Unlike Sugihara, Kotsuji seems to be considered a _bistle meshugahner (a little crazy)_ Japanese. He often wondered himself about his unbridled enthusiasm for the study of Talmud and Biblical Hebrew. Joseph Eidelberg published a book entitled _The Japanese and the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel_ (1980) and by studying the similarities between the Hebrew and Japanese alphabets, tries to prove that the Japanese are descendants of the Ten Lost Tribes. If we accept Eidelberg’s assumption, Kotsuji might have been a descendant of the Ten Lost Tribes. But of course, it isn’t so simple.

While Kotsuji was a little boy, at the beginning of the 20th century, there was no Jewish religion in Japan. Although a few Jews came to Japan through China in the ninth century, and a few more with Portuguese traders in the sixteenth, it wasn’t until the nineteenth century that there was anything like the Jewish religion in the country.

One day, Kotsuji found the Bible in a secondhand store, a Japanese translation by a Japanese-American missionary group. His Bible reading ended up causing a big change in the course of his life. He felt greatly enhanced by reading the Psalms.

Late one evening, while I was rehearsing this Psalm over and over, I was led into a state of religious rapture and felt myself really at the City of God. (Kotsuji 63)

Even though he was born a descendant of a long, illustrious line of Shinto priests, Kotsuji reached the point when he could not obey the traditional ceremony of the duty of lighting the sacred fire at the revered altar, and he wept bitterly. Seeing his spiritual turmoil, his parents worried about him. In the end, they showed a deep understanding for Kotsuji’s passion for a new religious vigor toward the Bible. After careful reading of the Old Testament and the New Testament from age 13 to 15, Kotsuiji came to a conclusion:

I was convinced Jesus intended only to be a reformer, and he died as Jesus, the Jew. I felt that to be a Christ was far from his intention. (Kotsuji 75)

His father, a Shinto priest, allowed him to follow his wish under the one condition of keeping his family tradition and heritage.

“You may go ahead with your new faith. Only remember your ancestors, to
honor them, and be proud of your great heritage.” (Kotsuji 67)

In 1916, Setsuzo Kotsuji decided to study the Bible at American Presbyterian College, Tokyo Meiji Gakuin, in Tokyo, and at last he became a minister, still harboring some doubts about Christianity, such as “the Divinity of Christ” (78).

In 1923, at the age of 24 years old, he married a beautiful Japanese Christian woman, Mineko Iwane. Then, after almost ten years’ experience as a minister in Japan, Kotsuji made his mind up to study the Old Testament at Auburn Theological Seminary in New York. After studying there he continued at the University of California at Berkley, and received a Ph.D. in 1931. The title of his dissertation was “The Origin and Evolution of the Semitic Alphabets.”

Dr. Kotsuji compared the West and the East:

The basic difference I feel between the Western world and East is the Western habit of analyzing, verbalizing and abstracting. This kind of thought process makes Western science possible, but it seems to me that there is a loss of some of the beauties of life. The Eastern mind works figuratively. The Orient is intuitive, subjective. Where the West is prosaic, the East is poetic. Where the West analyzes, the East symbolizes. Western poetry, for example, is inclined to be long, narrative, and explicit. Eastern poetry is very short and indirect, implying much by saying little. It is understandable, then, why the Old Testament, with its strong Oriental mystery and symbolism, fired my Japanese mind while the directness of the New Testament failed to strike a spark.

I left America as a Jew more than a Christian. (Kotsuji 130)

As one of the few Japanese Yiddishists, I can sympathize with Dr. Kotsuji’s intuitive reflection upon the distinction between the West and East. It is understandable how strongly he was attracted to the Old Testament despite the fact of being the son of a Shinto priest.

In 1931, he became a Hebrew professor in Japan at Aoyama Gakuin University. Because he caught typhoid fever, he had to leave the university in 1933, and his family again suffered from poverty. There is a rather comical episode about his innocent zeal for Biblical Hebrew in his memoir From Tokyo to Jerusalem. To pass the time in the quarantine hospital, he rehearsed Hebrew verses hour after hour, but he did not do the same with his English. Not long after he was discharged from the hospital, he tested his English and Hebrew by reading aloud to his wife.

"Mineko, my English doesn’t sound right to me. Listen, please."
She listened while I read a bit. “No. No, you used to read it better.” She paused.
“For God’s sake, what about your Hebrew?”
I snatched up a Hebrew Bible and began to read. Her features relaxed. “Yes, your pronunciation is as good as ever.” (Kotsuji 136)

Hearing this comment from his wife, he felt relieved, even though his wife understood neither English nor Hebrew. His zeal for Hebrew shows his absent-mindedness, so that he is entitled to be called a “luftmench” (someone with his head in the cloud) or even a “shlemiel” (simpleton) in Yiddish.

II. Kotsuji’s first contact with Jews in Manchuria

Dr. Kotsuji first encountered Jews while working for the South Manchuria Railway Company from 1938 till 1940.

In order to understand why Dr. Setsuzo Kotsuji could become so influential, we have to trace history back to his close relationship with the foreign minister Yosuke Matsuoka, who was convicted as a war criminal after World War II. In many cases, the stories of Chiune Sugihara, the Vice council of Lithuania in 1940, and Dr. Setsuzo Kotsuji overlap in intriguing ways.

In 1938, Yosuke Matsuoka, then president of the South Manchuria Railway, requested Dr. Kotsuji to become the adviser of Jewish affairs in Manchuria. In the beginning, Dr. Kotsuji refused, but in the end, he was persuaded by Matsuoka’s earnest entreaty and worked for Matsuoka for two years, until Mr. Matsuoka became Foreign Minister in 1940, at a critical moment of the Japanese history.

Mr. Matsuoka is the man who did not allow Mr. Sugihara to issue transit visas to Jewish refugees without money and destinations. In the book by Mr. Sugihara’s wife, Yukiko Sugihara’s Visas For Life, she criticizes Foreign Minister Matsuoka, who did not allow her husband to issue visas. As a result, the minister became target of criticism by the Jews, but Kotsuji, as a close friend of Matsuoka, supported the future foreign minister from a totally different perspective. Kotsuji favorably evaluates Matsuoka’s attitude towards Jews. It is hard to prove what kind of person Matsuoka was, but we can estimate his unbiased attitude toward Jewish immigrants from a speech. At a private banquet on December 31, 1940, new Foreign Minister Matsuoka told a group of Jewish business people:

“I am the man responsible for the alliance with Hitler, but nowhere have I promised that we would carry out his anti-Semitic policies in Japan. This is not simply my personal opinion, it is the position of Japan, and I have no compunction about announcing it to the world.” (Goodman 112)

Mr. Matsuoka’s declaration is based on the official Japanese policies toward Jews
in 1938. The highest policy-making body in the Japanese government, consisting of the prime minister, foreign minister, and the ministers of the army, navy, and treasury came to the following conclusion on December 6th in 1938:

1. Jews living in Japan, Manchuria, and China are to be treated fairly and in the same manner as other foreign nationals. No special effort to expel them is to be made.
2. Jews entering Japan, Manchuria, and China are to be dealt with on the basis of existing immigration policies pertaining to other foreigners.
3. No special effort to attract Jews to Japan, Manchuria, or China is to be made. However, exceptions may be made for businessmen and technicians with utility value for Japan. (Goodman 111)

This was the background when the "Japanese Schindler," Mr. Sugihara, issued 2139 Japanese transit visas to Polish Jews who stampeded to the Japanese consulate in Lithuania, from July 29 till August 28th in 1940. Japanese people traditionally did not share anti-Semitism with the rest of the world. Many military officers were well informed about the Jewish-American banker Jacob Schiff's great financial contribution to the Japanese government in the Russo-Japanese War from 1904-1905.

Through the close relationship with Mr. Matsuoka, Dr. Kotsuji showed a deep understanding and respect toward Matsuoka.

Yosuke Matsuoka, the president of the South Manchuria Railway and the man to whom I was directly responsible, was a badly understood man. Short and stocky, he wore a heavy mustache and projected an attitude of self-importance, but, he nonetheless was basically a good-hearted man. It is true that he played a major role in persuading Japan to sign the anti-Communist agreement with Germany. Nonetheless, his attitude toward the Jewish people was correct and even warm to some extent. He had spent part of his boyhood in America, had studied at the University of Oregon, and was friendly to the United States. He fervently opposed war with America until the very last. (Kotsuji 147)

While working in Manchuria as an advisor for Jewish affairs, Kotsuji made friends with Dr. Abraham Kaufman, an influential Jewish medical doctor in Manchuria, and with other Jewish leaders. At the Third Far Eastern Jewish Conference, held on December 23, 1939, Kotsuji gave a short speech entirely in Biblical Hebrew. Through the two-year contact with many influential Jews living in Manchuria, he began to feel closer to the Jewish people and the study of Judaism through his personal contact with them.

There is a witness about Kotsuji's selfless efforts to help Jewish refugees during
the Second World War by Rabbi Zerach Warhaftig, born in Volkovysk in the Russian Empire (today Vawkavysk, Belarus) in 1906. In 1941, Warhaftig and his family travelled east from Lithuania to Japan with a transit visa issued by Sugihara. On June 5, 1941 the Warhaftigs left Yokohama on the Japanese ocean liner *Hikawa Maru* and on June 17 they landed in Vancouver, Canada. During World War II, Rabbi Warhaftig convinced the Japanese Vice-Consul in Kaunas, Lithuania, Chiune Sugihara, to issue visas for the entire Mir Yeshiva. By issuing thousands of visas to the Jewish refugees, Chiune Sugihara saved thousands of lives and families from the Nazis who occupied first Poland and then Lithuania. After World War II, Warhaftig taught Jewish Law at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem from 1948-1963. In 1951, he was appointed Deputy Minister of Religions in the fourth Israeli government. After the 1961 elections (the fifth Knesset) he was appointed Minister of Religions, a position he held until 1974. In 1981 he retired from the Knesset. Warhaftig was among the founders of Bar-Ilan University.

According to Zorach Warhaftig's *Refugee and Survivor: Rescue Attempts during the Holocaust* (1984), the total number of Jewish refugees who came to Japan from July 1940 to May 1941 is 4664.

Rabbi Warhaftig also became acquainted with Kotsuji and wrote favorably about him. Though Kotsuji lived in Kamakura, close to Tokyo, he came all the way to Kobe to see Rabbi Warhaftig. They discussed Jewish and Japanese history and religion, but the communication was difficult for them. Rabbi Warhaftig’s English was quite limited, and Dr. Kotsuji knew only some chapters of the Psalms in Biblical Hebrew, but no Yiddish.

III. The Nazis sent some SS men to Japan in 1938.

According to Kotsuji, the Nazis sent some S.S. men to Japan, like Josef Albert Meisinger, a German SS-colonel in the Gestapo, also known as the “Butcher of Warsaw.” They organized a Political-Economic Association, called Seikei Gakkai, and it published a journal called “Researches into the Secret World Power,” a vehicle for translations of anti-Jewish pamphlets.

As a leading scholar of the Hebrew Bible, Dr. Kotsuji traveled all around Japan to give a series of lectures to deny the propaganda of anti-Semitism based on *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.

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1 The refugees managed to leave Lithuania thanks to the response of the Japanese consul Sugihara, the Dutch consul, Zwartendijk, and the British consul Gant, who provided entry visas to *Eretz Israel*. Some 2,200 refugees – including students and rabbis of the Mir Yeshiva – arrived in or passed through Japan. The Mir Yeshiva was the only yeshiva that managed to leave Lithuania in its entirety.
I was among the speakers; and I took advantage of the opportunity in government circles. I began by pointing out that Nazi notion of Rassenschande—racial shame—was absurd, since no civilized nation in the modern world is composed of a single original race. I pointed out why Hitler was so interested in promoting anti-Semitism in Japan and added what other details I know. (Kotsuji 172)

As a result of his activities, the military police kept an eye on Dr. Kotsuji, and finally he was arrested and tortured, but he was saved miraculously by his old friend, Lieutenant Yoshinori Shirahama, with whom Kotsuji had become acquainted during his stay in Manchuria.

In this way, Dr. Kotsuji risked his life for what he did for Jewish people. Under these terrible conditions, Dr. Kotsuji became suspected of being a spy for Jews. Later, his name was on the list of those to be assassinated by the military police, and no one could not guarantee his and his family’s lives. Just before the end of the war, they left Japan for Harbin where he could meet his reliable Jewish friends. His decision to risk his life as a Japanese for the Jews is astonishing. Taking the dangerous situation facing him into consideration, Kotsuji’s determination to escape to Manchuria was reasonable.

IV. Kotsuji in Manchuria again in 1945 just before the end of World War II and his reunion with Jewish friends in Harbin

As expected, Kotsuji and his family were received warmly by his Jewish friends in Harbin and stayed there a year till the end of the war.

The city was filled with many ethnic groups: Japanese, Manchurians, Russians, Koreans, Mongolians, and other nationalities. The population was almost one million. Manchuria remained a relatively prosperous place until the very last days of the war. Dr. Abraham Kaufman, the leader of the Jewish community, was the director of the Jewish Hospital and president of the Jewish Bank. He was suspected by the Japanese military police because he was well-connected with westerners.

One day, Dr. Kaufman was taken to the Japanese military station and was interrogated. Because Dr. Kaufman could speak Russian, he was suspected of being a Russian sympathizer. Hearing about this incident from Kaufman’s son, Kotsuji bravely visited the military base and saved him from his difficulties.

After that, Kotsuji became a frequent visitor to Dr. Kaufman’s house, ignoring the risk of arrest, while Jews refrained from visiting him for fear of being suspected themselves. Dr. Kaufman was very grateful for Kotsuji’s visits.

Just after the end of the war, Manchuria was thrown into turmoil with Russian soldiers’ looting, and it lasted till the Chinese Communists came into power. In 1946, the few Japanese remaining in the Japanese colony were finally repatriated to Japan under
the control of American armies. With the help of many Jews in Harbin, Kotuji’s family could safely return to Japan.

**Conclusion**

As Professor Timothy Snyder argues, without conscious awareness it is difficult for all of us to practice human goodness under devastating conditions.

Most of us would like to think that we possess the qualities of “moral instinct” and “human goodness.” Perhaps we imagine that we would be rescuers in some future catastrophe. Yet if states were destroyed, local institutions corrupted, and economic incentives directed toward murder, few of us would behave well. (320)

We have to realize that we might not act with “moral instinct” and “human goodness” if we do not deepen our sympathy toward different races through learning about and minimalizing racial prejudices. Like Kotsuji’s uncontrollable passion for Hebrew Bible and Judaism, I have been deeply involved with American Jewish and Yiddish literature studies for the last 40 years. My academic interest hopefully leads me to a better understanding of the Jewish culture and religion.

As mentioned in the first place, there is almost no direct interaction between Judaism and the Japanese people. As a result, we have never been anti-Semitic, except for a few military officers and politicians during the war. Still it is not enough. We have to elevate our interest in Jewish people and its culture in order to save ourselves from being influenced by misinformation and easily ignited to form anti-Semitic feelings. As a Japanese educator, I try to implant a correct understanding about Jewish people and Jewish culture into Japanese minds through lectures and publishing books. This is what I have learned from the study of Kotsuji’s personal history and from my long study of Jewish American literature and Yiddish literature. I believe that this is the power of academia and education.

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氷川丸：1939 年（昭和 14 年）6 月 20 日 宝塚少女歌劇団（現・宝塚歌劇団）の訪米芸術使節団一行がアメリカ公演からの帰朝時にシアトルから乗船。シアトル—バンクーバー—横浜—神戸。

1941 年（昭和 16 年）8 月 国際情勢によりシアトル航路閉鎖。

1941 年（昭和 16 年）日本政府に交換船として徴用され、在日アメリカ・カナダ人を送り届け，在米・在加日本人を乗せて帰国