

Major General Higuchi who saved the lives of 20,000 Jewish

Chapter Two

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1. Twenty thousand Jews stranded in the snow

On March 8th, 1938, a critical news was brought to Major General Higuchi who was the Chief of Special Mission Department of Harbin. It happened that about twenty thousand Jewish refugees who had fled from Nazis oppression were stranded in snow in Otopohl of the Soviet Union. They came to Manchuria for help by Siberia railway's cargo train, but were refused their entry by it. They couldn't go ahead neither go back. Foods had run out and increasing number of them were dying of cold because of hunger and cold. They were pushed from Frankfurt to Poland where they were expelled to Soviet Union because Poland had held about millions of Jewish people.

The Soviet Union had them settle in Siberia, which even themselves abandoned to colonize because of its cold. As a result, the Jewish people who were mostly urban habitants could not make it and they arrived Otopohl in an attempt to evacuate to Shanghai by way of Manchuria.

2. I agreed to the Jewish issue.

Doctor Kauffman, the chairman of Harbin Jewish Association rushed to General Higuchi and explained to him the plight of his fellow countrymen. However, it was beyond his commission to allow them to enter Manchuria without the permission of the Foreign Affairs Ministry of Manchuria. He thought the Ministry didn't make the move for fear of being accused by Kanto region Armed forces if the evacuation stimulated Hitler. Higuchi was upset about the situation. The Ministry didn't respect the pride of Manchuria as an independent country. The mission statement of the foundation of the country was the harmony of peoples

and the freedom and justice of all nations. “Doctor, I agreed to the Jewish issue! I will be responsible for this matter by all means. Please start the preparation of their acceptance.” Doctor Kauffman, who was moved by the firm statement of Higuchi cried over joy. Higuchi said, “Doctor, you’d better hurry. There’s no time to cry!” Immediately he called up Matsuoka, the Manchuria Railway’s Governor and started negotiation of the special evacuation train.

3. The refugees arrive

It was two days later on March 12th, more than ten executive officers led by Doctor Kauffman were busy checking hot drinks and clothes, giving directions to rescue teams. Then the evacuation train roared into the platform. The windows were full of lean faces with beards and the platform rang with raucous voices unexpectedly. No sooner had the trains stopped than the rescue teams went into the trains. Sick people and those who could not walk because of freezing were carried on stretchers one after another. A lot of refugees collapsed with tears hugging whoever there were in the platform. Thin children started crying and howling frantically as they found bottles of milk with their eyes rolled with surprise. “Well done, well done!” Doctor Kauffman comforted the sick refugees running around the platform with his tears rolling down his face. Hours later, General Higuchi received the report that all refugees in Otopol were completely evacuated to Harbin. Although there were over ten people who froze to death, all the refugees were admitted into the Chamber of Commerce and schools and provide them with food except sick people and more than twenty people with frostbite. Doctors said that there would have been quite a few casualties had the evacuation trains been delayed another day. About eighty per cent of the refugees traveled Dalian and Shanghai to the U.S. whereas the rest of four thousand refugees remained there as pioneer farmers and settled in Harbin inland. Higuchi took care of them fully such as fixing them up with land and housings, giving directions to his followers.

4. The stubborn appeal from German Foreign Minister

As was expected, a strong appeal was brought from Germany opposed to the protection of Jewish Refugee by General Higuchi. The German Foreign Minister Riebertrop sent the following letter of appeal through German Ambassador in Japan Mr. Otto. “A General of your country who is engaged in an important mission in Manchuria has not only criticized our national policy but also

interfered with the program and ideal of German nation and President Hitler. The action of the General will infringe upon the common vision of both Germany and Japan which has just enacted and will influence greatly against our friendly relationship. We urge a swift action of Japanese government to the General in question.”

The General was ordered to report to the Kanto Military Headquarters and made the following comment to the Chief of the Staff Hideki Tojo (later the Prime Minister). “If the German policy justifies in making the expelled Jewish refugees stranded nowhere, it must be a horrible anti-humanism. And it would be a shocking indignity and Manchuria and Japanese Government would be condemned as the nations which are against the humanism if they cooperated with the anti-humanistic German policy. I am in favor of the diplomatic relation and friendship between Japan and Germany. However, I believe that Japan is not a subject state of Germany, nor Manchuria is of Japan.” Higuchi looked Tojo straight in the face. The Chief remained silent as Higuchi asked, “Chief Tojo, do you think it is fair to bully the weak assisting Hitler?” Tojo said after groping for words and gazing at the ceiling. “General, I understand what you mean completely. Your point is right and reasonable. I will communicate with the headquarter regarding this matter and make it unquestionable.”

5. The departure of General Higuchi

What awaited for Higuchi was far from being unquestionable, but the promotion to the second section manager of the General Staff Office. This personnel transfer must have reflected Japan’s creed that equal racial treatment was the national policy and it would never support Hitler’s racial discrimination policy. On the day of his departure, the railway station was crowded with more than two thousand well-wishers. Amongst them there were families of pioneer farmers from tens of kilometers away in the inland who came all the way on horse coaches. They were the Jewish refugees who Higuchi had made efforts in finding lands and dwellings. When Higuchi stood at the station, a round of cheers surrounded him all at once. They chanted, “Higuchi, Higuchi” one after another waving Japanese and Manchurian flags. An elderly white-haired Jewish woman who was guided by her grandchild kneeled down the road and prayed to Higuchi weeping all the time. Entering the waiting room, Doctor Kauffman came with the representative

of White Russian Mr. Rosanov. Although both Jews and White-Russians had been repeating bloody conflicts, they became in good terms with each other by Higuchi as he founded a club for their friendship. Mr. Rosanov gave a long kiss to Doctor Kauffman on the cheek and said.

“This is our farewell gift to you. We will be friendlier with each other without forgetting General’s words.” As Higuchi stood at the last train’s observation deck, the train “ASIA” started moving slowly sounding its train horn loudly.

“Higuchi!, Higuchi!” The crowd rushed and filled the platform jumping over the entrance. Innocent looking boys kept running after the train “ASIA” waving their both hands with their silver hair shaking wildly.

6. Now or never to answer for the kindness in Otopohl

After the war, the Soviet Far-East Force claimed Higuchi as a war criminal, who was then in Sapporo and requested him to report to them through the Allied Forces Headquarter. The Soviet Forces, which had attacked Northern Chishima islands until August 19th even after the cease-fire was greatly damaged by General Higuchi who was responsible for the Northern area protection and had a grudge against him having been stopped to intrude into Hokkaido. Having heard the crisis of Higuchi, the New York Headquarter of the World Jewish Association started to make a move. Amongst them were those who had been rescued by Higuchi in Otopol. “Now is the time to repay his obligation!” All the Jewish people in the world were harangued and the movement to rescue him began. As the World Jewish Association lobbied the U.S. Ministry of Defense and the Macarthur General Headquarter rejected the Soviet’s claim and by contraries announced his protection. The Jewish people who had been persecuted in their long history all the more could not forget a favor by others easily. The inscription “General Higuchi, Great Humanitarian” carved on the Golden Book standing on the hill of Jerusalem is the certificate of his favor.