

## THE STAR ON THE GRAVE

*By Linda Margolin Royal*

*South Melbourne, Affirm Press, 2024*

*The Star on the Grave* is an historical novel which, while a work of fiction, is based on Australian writer Linda Royal's real life and that of her father and grandmother and specifically on the wonderful rescues of 'Japanese Schindler' Chiune Sugihara, the Japanese vice-consul in Kaunas, Lithuania from 1934 to 1940. Her work bears a quote of praise from Tom Keneally, author of *Schindler's Ark* ('an extraordinary tale, elegantly told') and an aphorism from survivor Olga Horak ('... I don't live in the past, the past lives in me').

While most of the story is told from the point-of-view of Rachel, the novel's protagonist in 1968 (a thinly disguised Linda), certain sections are imagined reminiscences of Sugihara who was living in Moscow at that time. We learn about Rachel's working life and her dalliance with Greek doctor Yanni, her estrangement from her father Michael and her love for and devotion to her grandmother Felka. When she and Yanni contemplate marriage, Felka is impelled to tell Rachel that she is Jewish and Rachel learns for the first time that her Catholic upbringing has been to shelter her from the wartime experiences of her father, mother and grandparents. Her grandmother wants to go to Japan for a reunion of those rescued by Sugihara and persuades Rachel to accompany her. The meeting with Sugihara is fictional, but his heroic, illegal deed in signing thousands of visas for Lithuanian Jews to enter Japan on the way to Curaçao is a fact which earned him retribution from his own nation but a Righteous Among the Nations citation from Israel. Also given such a citation was honorary Dutch Consul Jan Zwartendijk who collaborated with Sugihara by issuing entry permits to Curaçao. The Author's Note on pages 272 to 276 details the history of these events.

Royal did, however, meet Sugihara's youngest son, Nobuki, born in 1949. He was able to give her details of his father's character, despite having been born after these life-saving events. Through his father's recognition by Israel as a Righteous Among the Nations, Nobuki was able to continue his education at tertiary level in Israel.

The characters in the novel are described in a way that brings them to life and the contrast of their lives between 1930-40 and 1968 is stark. Rachel's shock understanding of the Jewish background she knew

nothing about provides the author with the opportunity to educate her readers about the Holocaust and this particularly miraculous rescue of some Lithuanian Jews. She writes that Sugihara was the medicine which sustained life, not the cure. She has her grandmother say that she could survive anything as long as she let life in. Her father, in contrast, as a child at the time, suffered trauma from which he could not escape.

Royal has researched and written this novel to highlight the lifelong trauma carried by survivors which impacts their family relationships. Her research gives her an opportunity to highlight some Jewish customs such as *tahara* (Jewish ritual cleansing of the body before burial). The book is a tribute to the strength of survivors and to the strong moral code which marked the life and behaviour of Chiune Sugihara, Righteous Among the Nations.

Helen Bersten

## SURVIVAL AND SANCTUARY: TESTIMONIES OF THE HOLOCAUST AND LIFE BEYOND

*Translated and edited by Freda Hodge*

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*Foreword by Professor Paul R. Bartrop.*

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This is Hodge's second book, after *Tragedy and Triumph: Early Testimonies of Jewish Survivors of World War II* (2018). Here, just as in that earlier work, Hodge has translated a number of Holocaust survivors' testimonies. The unifying factor in this case is that six of the seven featured survivors relocated to Australia after the war. (The seventh, David Tuszynski, lived in France, but frequently visited Melbourne.) The testimonies were originally collected in Yiddish by the Melbourne YIVO Committee in 1947–48 and were published in a booklet called *Pages of Pain and Suffering*.

*Survival and Sanctuary* begins with an excellent foreword by the Australian Professor Paul R. Bartrop, Professor Emeritus of History at Florida Gulf Coast University. Bartrop is an esteemed scholar whose many books focus extensively on the Holocaust and genocide. His foreword offers some meaningful reflections on the value of survivor testimonies as historical sources. While noting that such testimonies