

Sugihara saved more people than Schindler — including Linda Royal's family. And she wants the world to know

 [abc.net.au/news/2020-01-27/linda-royal-sugihara-holocaust-film-the-saviour/11889322](https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-01-27/linda-royal-sugihara-holocaust-film-the-saviour/11889322)

The only thing Linda Royal's father ever said about the man who saved her family was that he had "kind eyes".

That man was Chiune Sugihara, a Japanese diplomat who was sent to Lithuania in 1939, where he was confronted by Polish Jewry escaping the German and Soviet occupation.

In a story that echoes the better-known tale of Oskar Schindler, Sugihara defied his superiors' orders to write and issue thousands of transit visas, allowing the Jewish refugees to flee.

Royal wants to share this story with the world to honour Sugihara's memory and combat anti-Semitism in Australia.

But rather than telling her family's story just as it happened, she's changing some of the details, turning it into fiction.

Adapting history can be fraught, as Melbourne author Heather Morris discovered after writing the global bestseller *The Tattooist of Auschwitz*.

The Auschwitz Memorial criticised Morris over "numerous errors" relating to incorrect depictions of train routes and a sexual relationship between a concentration camp director and a Jewish prisoner.

Morris insists that her novel is based on a true story and that her and others' research is valid.

Royal, whose background is in advertising, is still in the process of writing her feature film, *The Saviour*.

The story follows a young woman who escorts her grandmother to Japan to personally thank Sugihara. Along the way, she connects with her traumatised father.

"I didn't make a journey with my grandmother to thank Sugihara, but many survivors wanted to, so this story represents any of us," Royal says.

Royal is careful to note that her film won't change the material, historical facts of what Sugihara did. The fictionalised part is the later story of the family who survived.

She hopes her project will be entertaining enough to capture the attention of fickle audiences who might pass on a documentary about Sugihara's life.

"[People] don't want to go to a museum on the weekend. The man in the street wants to go and relax," she says.

Who was Chiune Sugihara?

The Japanese diplomat who saved Royal's family was a man with "guts and courage", according to Konrad Kwiet, the resident historian at the Sydney Jewish Museum.

In 1939 the conditions facing Polish Jewry were very dangerous. The country held the largest Jewish community in Europe — more than three million people.

"They had already experienced a wave of anti-Semitism during the interwar years and this outburst of hatred became quite immense," Mr Kwiet says.

In Warsaw that same year, Royal's great-grandfather gathered the younger members of his family and told them to get out as soon as they could.

Royal says "he could see the writing on the wall" — he understood the tide was turning against Jewish people.

He organised carts and wagons to move his descendants out of Poland.

"Some went to up to Bialystok. Some ended up in gulags in Russia. And a couple went to Lithuania," she says.

Linda's grandparents, Felka and Mark Margolin, were the ones who made it to Kaunas, Lithuania, with their son, Linda's father Michael, where they received Sugihara visas — numbers 745 and 746.

Yad Vashem, the World Holocaust Remembrance Centre in Israel, estimates Sugihara signed between 2,100 and 3,500 visas, saving more people than Schindler.

Mr Kwiet says the diplomat disobeyed orders from his superiors and continued to sign the transit visas from late 1940 through to June 1941.

"He had the guts and the courage to deviate from the official policy of Imperial Japan and issue these life-saving documents."

Experts don't know the exact number of Sugihara transit visas, because they weren't verified through official Japanese channels.

The visas allowed safe passage through the Soviet Union to Kobe, a city in Japan's south, where Konrad says the average stay was between several weeks and three months.

From Kobe, survivors dispersed, settling in places as diverse as Palestine, Shanghai, Australia and America.

Is the literal truth the only truth there is?

Despite the controversy over some fictional stories of the Holocaust, ethicist Matt Beard says there's room for creative interpretations of historical events.

"We tend to think about truth and historical truth as being in some ways scientific — that there is a there is an objective reality," says Dr Beard, a fellow at the Ethics Centre.

But that narrow view can exclude other ways of getting important information across.

Dr Beard says storytelling can "allow us to access other truths that are no less real, but are not empirical or scientific or historical".

And they can be more effective in allowing us to understand the human impacts of historical catastrophes.

Dr Beard says there are degrees of moral justification when dealing with historical drama.

If Hitler were represented as a great philanthropist or humanitarian, "that would risk obfuscating a more important truth that we need to be aware of" — although [Taika Waititi's *Jojo Rabbit*](#), where Hitler is depicted as the imaginary friend of a German child, has impressed many critics.

The important thing, Dr Beard says, is that artists are clear about the nature of their project, perhaps by including a message at the start of a film explaining that it is "inspired by" real events.

"I think there's virtue in being transparent around those things," Dr Beard says.

"That enables people to be able to access and learn what the artist is trying to communicate without also being misled."

Royal says her film is "trying to educate the world on something incredible that one human being did".

And if it gets people talking, she believes her contribution to historical awareness will have been worth it.