



# What is Good Citizenship?

## THE STORY OF CHIUNE SUGIHARA

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**One of the primary reasons** for social studies education in the United States is to prepare young people for the responsibilities of living in a democratic society. On the surface, this purpose seems clear enough, but I have found that some of the more complicated and contentious issues surrounding the creation and training of future citizens are often “papered over” or “watered down.” For example, my daughter brought home a fourth grade social studies textbook that defined the term “citizen” as one who will “work to improve all the groups they belong to and to make the world a better place.”<sup>1</sup> To me, this definition is painfully banal, even by textbook standards, and provides students with little opportunity for discussion or reflection.

In fact, the notion of what qualifies as “good citizenship” is fraught with contention. This sort of controversy is not necessarily a bad thing, and I have looked for ways to bring elementary students into this discussion in a way that is appropriate for their age and skill level.

### Definitions

I have developed a lesson that asks students to reflect upon different definitions

and criteria for “citizenship” and to think critically about what makes a “good citizen.” The lesson uses an interdisciplinary approach that combines standards of social studies education (including basic questions about citizenship and values such as tolerance, obedience, and honesty) along with reading and language arts skills. The heart of the lesson revolves around reading and discussing an excellent children’s book entitled *Passage to Freedom: The Sugihara Story* written by Ken Mochizuki and illustrated by Dom Lee.<sup>2</sup> The lesson could be used in the fourth or fifth grades.

The lesson begins simply. I write the word “citizen” across the board and then ask my students to help define this word. I ask them to provide characteristics of a “good citizen.” Inevitably, the answers from year to year are remarkably similar; perhaps as importantly, the answers tend to come quickly and with no evidence of indecision or doubt. Students often call out words such as “law-abiding,” “honest,” “dependable,” “trustworthy” and “respectful.” Once I have copied these words on the board, we read aloud *Passage to Freedom*. I ask the students to keep their word choices in mind as the book is read (the first pages by me, and then students help in the reading aloud).

### Fleeing Hitler

*Passage to Freedom* tells the powerful story of Chiune Sugihara, a Japanese diplomat assigned in 1940 to the Japanese consulate in Lithuania. The book is based on the oral recollection of Sugihara’s middle son, Hiroki.

Chiune Sugihara travels to Lithuania with his wife, their three children, and an aunt. While working in the consulate, the Sugihara family develops a warm and friendly relationship with the local Jewish community, even being invited to and attending a Hanukkah celebration. The family’s life is changed forever as the German army marches into Poland, which meets Lithuania’s southern border. Hiroki is awakened by a large crowd of people—men, women and children—gathering outside the gates of the consulate. Hiroki soon learns that the crowd is made up of Jewish refugees looking for escape from the Nazis. His mother tells him, “We don’t know what is going to happen.” The poignancy of this bit of dialogue contrasts with much of what one finds in elementary social studies textbooks, where the outcomes never seem in doubt and the narrative is a continual tale of progress and achievement.

The Jewish crowd has gathered in the hopes of attaining visas from the

Japanese government's representative, Mr. Sugihara. They hoped to use the visas in order to travel through the Soviet Union into Japan and, eventually, on to other destinations. Mochizuki's writing and the illustrations of Dom Lee do an excellent job of conveying the fear and desperation of the Jewish people gathered at the gate of the Sugihara residence. Chiune Sugihara informs the refugees that he will have to ask permission from the Japanese government before he could possibly issue the hundreds of visas for which they are asking. Meanwhile, the Jewish refugees will have to wait, he says. They remained encamped outside the consulate.

### Disobedience

When the answer comes from the Japanese government, it is an unequivocal "no." Sugihara resists this answer. He cables Tokyo on three separate occasions, asking again for permission to give the Jewish people the visas that stand between them and persecution by the Nazis, but each time the answer is "no."

Finally, Sugihara gathers his family around him. "I have to do something," he tells them. "I may have to disobey my government, but if I don't, I will be disobeying God." The family supports the decision, and he announces to the waiting crowd that he would issue a visa to each and every one of them.

Sugihara then wrote hundreds of visas. As he prepared himself and his family to leave for Germany (where the Japanese government had reassigned him, ironically), Sugihara continued to issue these illegal travel visas from his hotel room.

The Sugihara family was eventually imprisoned in a Soviet internment camp for eighteen months. When they were able to finally return to Japan, Chiune was forced to resign from the diplomatic services because he had so flagrantly disobeyed his government's orders.

After reading the main story, I turn to a large political wall map of the world and trace the travels of Sugihara and his

family. (I note in passing that national boundaries have changed since the 1940s, but the path of their travels can be generally shown.)

### Contradictions

I ask students if Sugihara was a "good citizen." Of course they all want to answer "yes," because Sugihara acted with such nobility, humanity and heroism. But students quickly realize that a literal reading of the words on the board, the results of the class "brainstorming" the definition of the phrase "good citizen," doesn't fit with Sugihara's actions. For instance, it is difficult to argue that Sugihara was "law abiding." After all, his government told him explicitly, three times, that he was not authorized to issue visas to the Jewish fugitives seeking sanctuary. So not only is it impossible to argue that he was law-abiding but it is clear that he

willfully broke the law.

At this point, it is instructive to ask students what other historical figures might have taken actions that do not fit with a literal definition of a good citizen." Almost immediately someone in the class will mention Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who like Mahatma Gandhi, and Henry David Thoreau, went to jail rather than obey what he believed to be unjust laws.<sup>3</sup> Dr. King was arrested approximately thirty times as a result of his nonviolent protests against Jim Crow laws that existed in Southern states.<sup>4</sup> So I ask my students the obvious question: Does this mean that Dr. King was a bad citizen?



## Honesty

After our discussion of the term “law abiding,” I turn my students’ attention back to their choice of the word “honest” to describe a good citizen. I ask them if they could classify Sugihara as having been honest throughout the book. As they contemplate this definition, one or more students will remind the class that Sugihara did not make clear to his government what he was doing. He chose to disobey his orders and issue traveling visas to his Jewish neighbors despite what he has been told to do, which is certainly a form of lying. No one in the class wants to classify Chiune Sugihara as a dishonest man, and yet the evidence presented in the book cannot be simply ignored. Students are very hesitant to classify this man as dishonest precisely because of his actions to save so many Jewish people from the cruel hands of the approaching Nazis.



Japan ▶

“I am proud that my father had the courage to do the right thing. Yet, his superiors in the Japanese government did not agree. The years after my family left Kaunas [Lithuania in 1940] were difficult ones. We were imprisoned for 18 months in a Soviet internment camp; and when we finally returned to Japan, my father was asked to resign from diplomatic service. . . .”

— Hiroki Sugihara, writing in the Afterword to  
PASSAGE TO FREEDOM: THE SUGIHARA STORY  
by Ken Mochizuki.

## Final Recognition

At this point, I read aloud the afterword of the book, in which Hiroki Sugihara writes that, in the 1960s, his father began to hear from “Sugihara survivors,” Lithuanian Jews who had escaped the Nazis with the use of visas that he had issued. In 1992, six years after his death, a monument to Chiune Sugihara “was dedicated in his birthplace of Yaotsu, Japan, on a hill that is now known as the Hill of Humanity.”

Through the heroism of Sugihara, it becomes apparent to young students that the concept of citizenship can be complicated. As we wrestle with complexities and contradictions, we realize that, in the realm of human events, we cannot expect to arrive at concrete, absolute answers, as one might in the field of mathematics. Learning to examine such subtleties, to not shy away from them, is a necessary skill for citizens in a democratic society.

## Critical Thinking

Utilizing the children’s book *Passage to Freedom* allows the elementary school social studies teacher to cause his or her students to think critically about views on citizenship while also providing “opportunities to investigate human motives and realize the consequences of character actions.”<sup>5</sup> The inspiring story

of Chiune Sugihara makes the difficult issue of defining citizenship more than a mere analytical exercise. It becomes personal, which is precisely as it should be. Sugihara’s agonizing decision—obey his government, protect his job, provide security for his family, or obey his conscience—shows students how complex and intimately intertwined is citizenship, moral consciousness, and social responsibility. Using the characters in children’s literature, memorable characters like Chiune Sugihara, is a way to place the debate before the class in a historical context.

If we take even a cursory glance at the front page of newspapers or watch the nightly news, we cannot help but see that citizenship is again an ideal that is being fought over. With issues in the news such as the decision to go to war, freedom of speech, wiretapping of American citizens, and a host of others, the social studies profession has an ethical and moral obligation to help our students master the necessary tools and acquire the dispositions they will need to intelligently contemplate and debate these issues as adult citizens. To do less is to fail our vocation and our students. Defining citizenship is not an outcome; it is a process that deserves attention and respect. Our students are waiting. 🌐

## Notes

1. Richard G. Boehm, et al., *Social Studies: States and Regions* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 2000), 19.
2. Ken Mochizuki, *Passage to Freedom: The Sugihara Story* (New York: Lee and Low Books, 1997).
3. Ronald Duncan, ed., *Selected Writings of Mahatma Gandhi* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1951); Henry David Thoreau, *The Higher Law: Thoreau on Civil Disobedience and Reform* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).
4. “Martin Luther King, Jr.: A Biographical Sketch,” [www.lib.lsu.edu/hum/mlk/srs218.html](http://www.lib.lsu.edu/hum/mlk/srs218.html).
5. Eric Groce and Robin Groce, “Authenticating Historical Fiction: Rationale and Process,” *Education Research and Perspectives* 32, no.1 (2005):102.

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