

He Helped Jews Escape the Holocaust. He Died Unknown.

Aristides de Sousa Mendes was his name. We should remember his courage.

Jan. 27, 2019

By Richard Hurowitz

Mr. Hurowitz is the publisher of The Octavian Report, a quarterly magazine of ideas.

Anyone who has seen “Casablanca” knows the connection between Portugal and World War II refugees. But few know the story of the Portuguese diplomat Aristides de Sousa Mendes, who in 1940 saved tens of thousands of lives only to be punished for this heroism by his own government. As we mark Holocaust Remembrance Day on Sunday, we should honor this man who engaged in what one historian called “perhaps the largest rescue action by a single individual during the Holocaust.”

An aristocratic scion, Mr. Sousa Mendes entered the foreign service after law school and spent years on a whirlwind diplomatic tour taking him from Zanzibar to San Francisco before arriving in the south of France in 1938. Mr. Sousa Mendes was a bon vivant and excelled as a diplomatic host, entertaining luminaries famous across the world like Albert Einstein and King Alfonso XIII of Spain. But with his posting as consul-general in Bordeaux, things took a more serious turn.

As the winds of war swept across Europe, Portugal’s autocratic prime minister, Antonio de Oliveira Salazar, was determined to maintain a strict neutrality. So in late 1939, a couple of months after the German invasion of Poland, the Portuguese Foreign Ministry issued its infamous Circular 14 to all embassies and consulates, announcing new regulations concerning categories of people who would not be issued visas without direct approval from the Foreign Ministry. Those “of undetermined, contested or disputed nationality” were excluded, as were those unlikely to be able to freely return to their home country or support themselves. One category was stark: “Jews expelled from the countries of their nationality.” Circular 14 covered the very refugees for whom passage was a matter of life and death.

Mr. Sousa Mendes resisted this order from the start. Then in May 1940, the Nazi blitzkrieg swept into France. Tens of thousands of people descended on Bordeaux by train, car, bicycle and even foot. Crowds formed at the Portuguese consulate. Mr. Sousa Mendes cabled Lisbon for instructions. The response: enforce Circular 14.

On June 17, Paris fell. Mr. Sousa Mendes became more and more tortured by what he saw. In front of the great synagogue of Bordeaux, he met Chaim Kruger, a young Polish rabbi with his family crowded along with thousands of Jews in the square. Mr. Sousa Mendes offered to help, but his request for visas for Mr. Kruger and his family was rejected. Mr. Sousa Mendes assured the rabbi he would do everything in his power to get the necessary papers.

“It’s not just me that needs help,” the rabbi told him, “but all my fellow Jews who are in danger of their lives.”

The words hit Mr. Sousa Mendes like a thunderbolt. For three days, he took to his bed in despair, according to a fine biography by Jose-Alain Fralon, “A Good Man in Evil Times: The Story of Aristides de Sousa Mendes.” Then he emerged full of energy. “From now on I’m giving everyone visas,” the diplomat declared. “There will be no more nationalities, races or religion.”

“I cannot allow all you people to die,” he told the refugees.

Mr. Kruger collected the passports of the Jews in the square. Mr. Sousa Mendes signed them all. Indeed he reportedly proceeded to sign every visa put in front of him, setting up a veritable assembly line. His two sons along with other members of the family and Mr. Kruger prepared the passports and visas for signature, while his deputy, 32-year-old Jose Seabra, dutifully stamped them.

News quickly spread and the consulate was suddenly filled to capacity. The consul himself worked well into the night signing visas, his signature morphing from “Aristides de Sousa Mendes” to “Mendes” as his hand tired. Mr. Seabra desperately tried to maintain order, begging applicants to come only during normal hours. “Come back when the dictator is not here!” Mr. Sousa Mendes joked to them.

Mr. Sousa Mendes’s actions were brought to the attention of his superiors by an act of fantastic pettiness. An Englishwoman who had been asked to wait a few hours for an ordinary travel visa stormed out of the consulate and filed a complaint. The British Embassy in Lisbon duly complained to the Portuguese Foreign Ministry that Mr. Sousa Mendes was operating outside of normal business hours

and falsely asserted that he was demanding fees for visas.

Mr. Salazar personally ordered Mr. Sousa Mendes to shut down, instructing his ambassador to France to investigate what was going on. Luckily, Mr. Sousa Mendes moved to the consulate he oversaw in Bayonne to continue his work. When the local vice consul arrived, he found Mr. Sousa Mendes ensconced at a desk where he spent three days granting visas.

In June 1940, an armistice between France and Germany was imminent, meaning the border would soon be sealed. It was a race against time. Mr. Salazar ordered that Mr. Sousa Mendes be stripped of his right to issue visas, even as Mr. Sousa Mendes made his way to Hendaye, near the Spanish border. There, Mr. Sousa Mendes explicitly defied the dictator's orders, signing not only the passports thrust at him by desperate refugees, but also identity cards and random scraps of paper that, marked with his signature, allowed entrance to Portugal.

At the border itself, Mr. Sousa Mendes drove a caravan of refugees to a little-known crossing he often used to avoid traffic back to Lisbon. The Spanish border guards, who had no telephone, had not yet received word from Madrid that the border had been closed. "I'm the Portuguese consul. These people are with me," Mr. Sousa Mendes told them and escorted the group over the border.

In July, Mr. Sousa Mendes returned to Portugal and the alarming news that Salazar had opened up disciplinary proceedings against him. "My aim was first and foremost humanitarian," he explained in his response.

The Foreign Ministry concluded that Mr. Sousa Mendes had caused a situation that reflected very badly on Portugal in the eyes of the Spanish authorities and German occupying forces.

"Lives had to be saved, and families prevented from being split up," Mr. Sousa Mendes said. "I also thought of the fate that would be in store for those people were they to fall into the hands of the enemy. Many of them were Jews who had already been hounded and who were trying to escape from the horror of further persecution."

At Mr. Salazar's behest, Mr. Sousa Mendes was removed from his consular position and rank and forced to retire without a pension. At age 55, his career was over.

Mr. Sousa Mendes spent the next decade shunned and in dire financial straits, hobbled by a stroke. Mr. Salazar, meanwhile, boasted of all the things that Portugal had done for those fleeing the Holocaust. "As regards the refugees, we did our duty, though it is a pity we could not do more," he said, according to Mr. Fralon's account.

Mr. Sousa Mendes died in obscurity in 1954, blackballed by the government and bombarded by creditors, reduced to being fed by a local Jewish soup kitchen.

"Was he a great man? Was he mad in showing so little instinct for self-preservation?" one of his sons asked. "The answer lies in all of us when we try to pass judgment on him. I am proud of the fact that I was lucky enough to have such a man as my father."

Tens of thousands today are alive because of his courage.

Richard Hurowitz is an investor, writer and the publisher of The Octavian Report, a quarterly magazine of ideas.

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